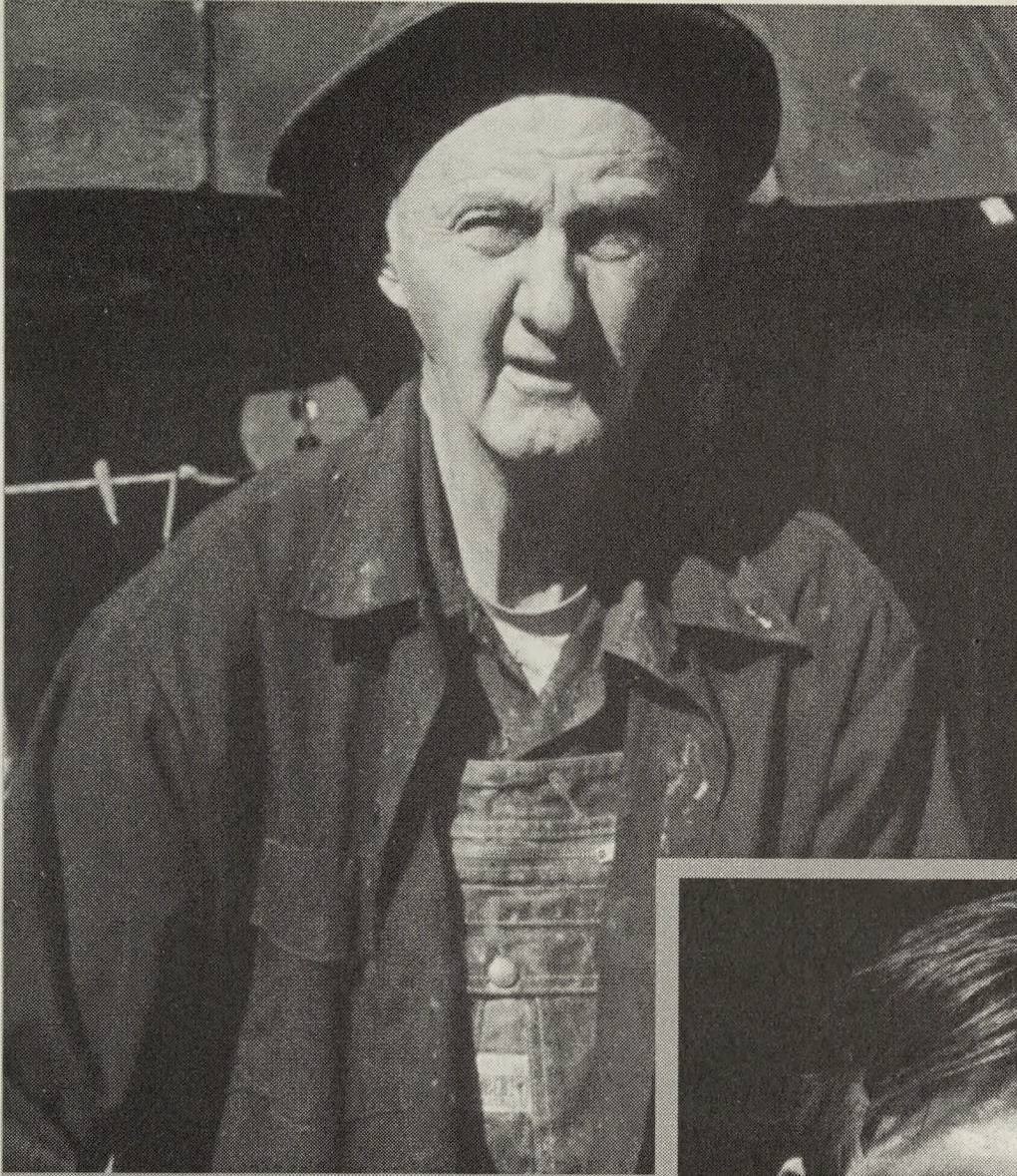
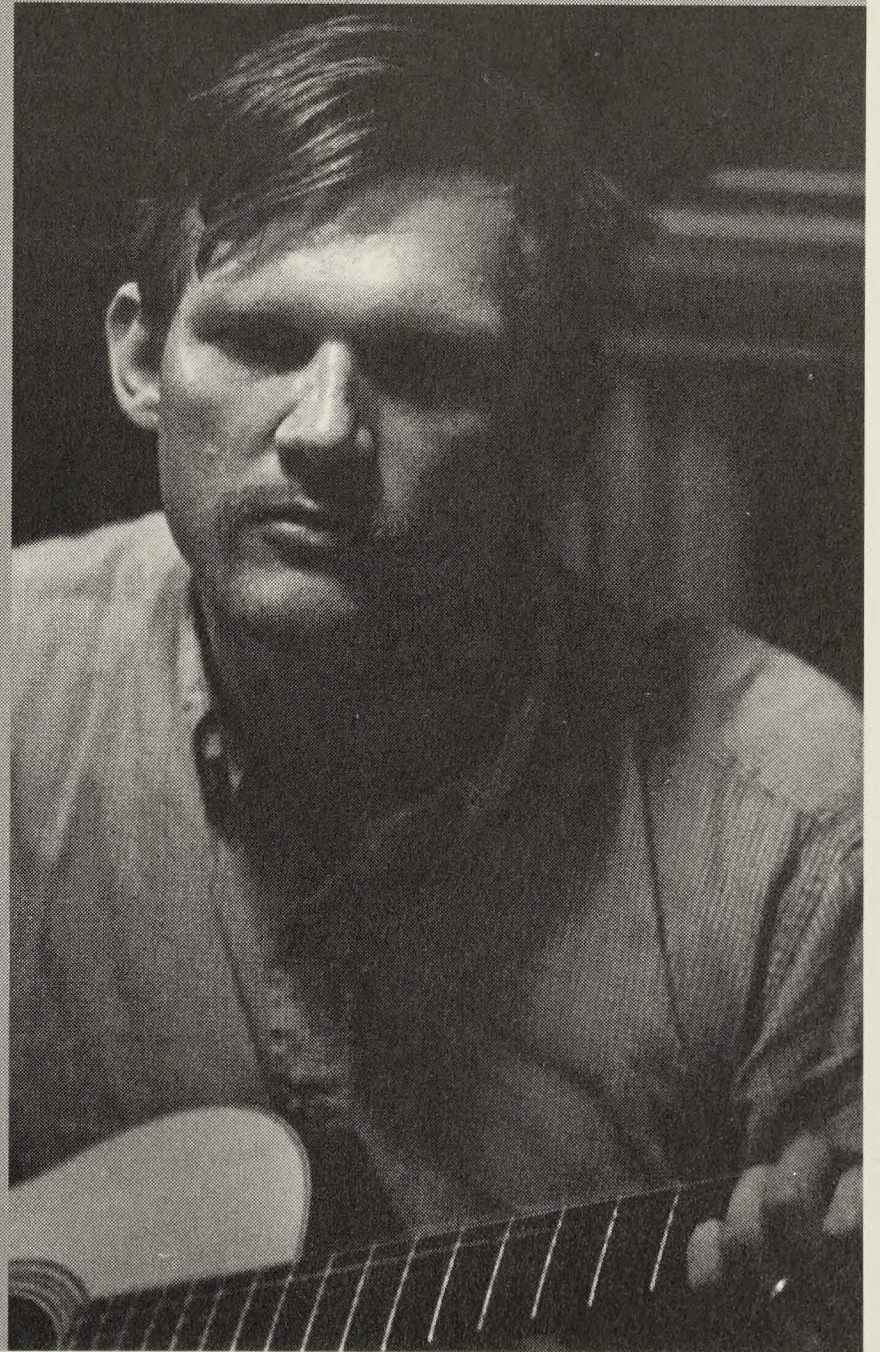


# Folklore Journal



*Dedicated in  
remembrance of*

*Ray Hicks  
&  
Tommy Thompson*





# North Carolina Folklore Journal

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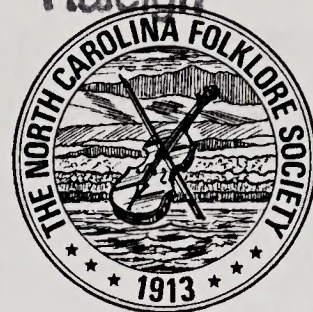
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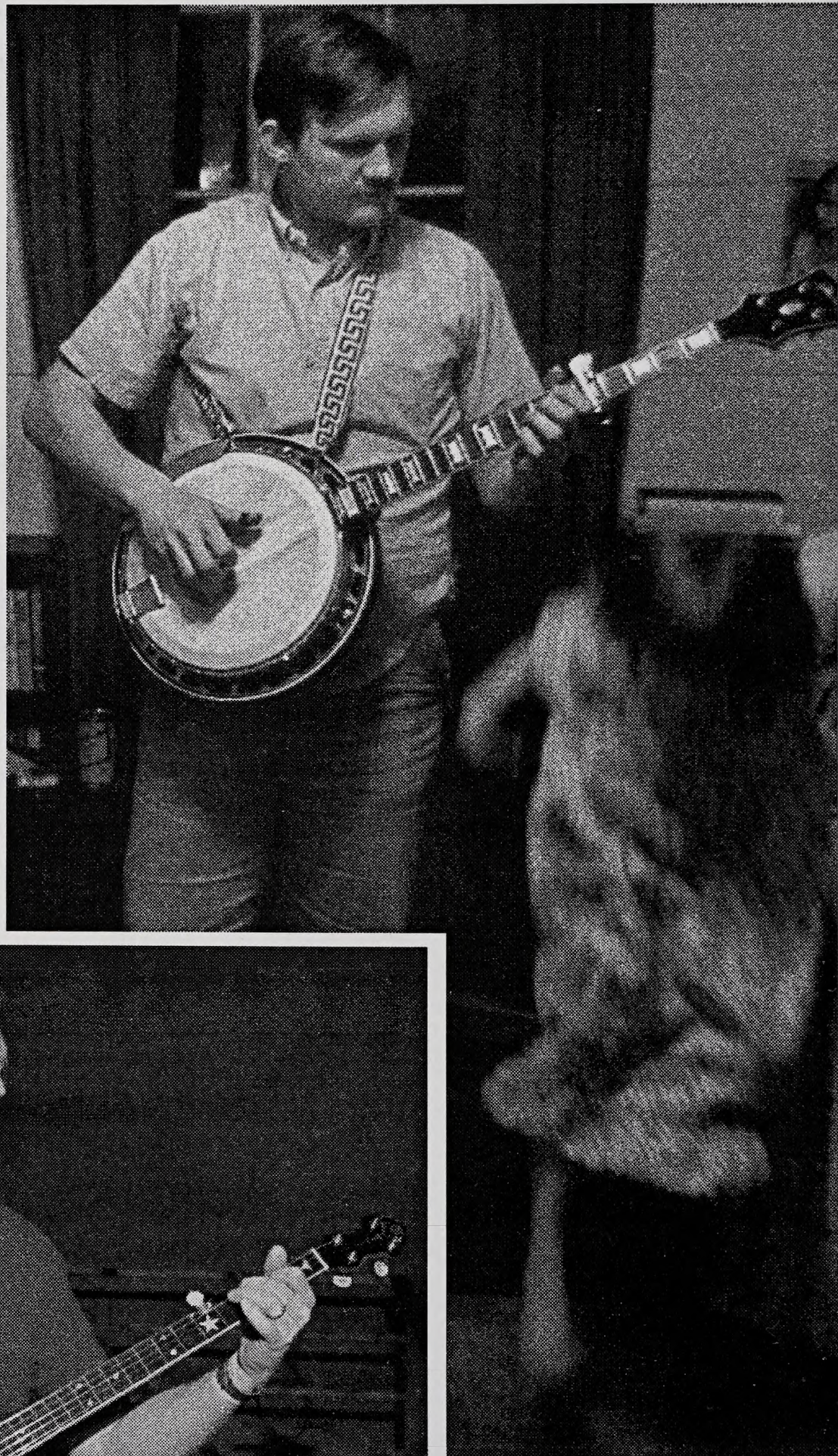


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*Sheila Pratt (left) and Tommy Thompson (right), c. 1964. Photo by John Menapace. Tommy Thompson (bottom left), c. 1990. Photos courtesy of Jesse Thompson Eustice.*





*Dedicated to the memory of*  
**Tommy Thompson (1937–2003)**

*– Jack Bernhardt*

**T**ommy Thompson, venerable artist and founding member of Chapel Hill's popular string band, The Red Clay Ramblers, passed away on January 24, after a long struggle with an Alzheimer's-like illness. The beloved singer, songwriter, banjo player, playwright, actor, and friend of folklore was sixty-five.

Those who knew him describe the amiable artist as "larger than life." It's an apt description, owing as much to his magnetic personality as to his robust physical presence. "Tommy sort of did things in a large way," recalls former Red Clay Ramblers fiddler and co-founder, Bill Hicks. "It's not just that he was a big guy, but he did a lot of things that were noticeable. He just did broad things. He was a generous, welcoming person, and he cared about people" (interview with author).

"People use the word 'charisma'" in describing Tommy, adds Mike Craver, who played piano with the Ramblers from 1974 to 1986. "He was unusual and out of the ordinary, but in a very appealing way. I think he had a kind of authority about him. He had that kind of iconoclastic renegade quality that set in nicely with his music and personality. He was a very warm person" (interview with author).

Born July 22, 1937, in St. Albans, West Virginia, Thompson played football for Kenyon College, where he earned a B.A. in Philosophy in 1959. Following graduation, he served with the Coast Guard in New Orleans where, in his off-duty hours, he began learning to play the banjo. In 1963, he resigned his commission as Lieutenant Junior Grade, and enrolled as a graduate student in philosophy at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Soon after arriving in North Carolina, he and his guitarist wife, Bobbie, began to seek out other musicians to play with and learn from. They began attending fiddlers' conventions and hosting Friday night picking parties at their sprawling farmhouse in Durham's Hollow Rock



Community, on Old Erwin Road. Bertram Levy, a Duke University medical student and mandolin player, and Alan Jabbour, a classically-trained violinist who was earning his PhD at Duke while studying Southern fiddle tunes, were among those who attended the Friday night jams. Enjoying their common interest in old-time Southern music, the four friends founded the Hollow Rock String Band in 1964.

Just before disbanding in 1968, Hollow Rock released *Traditional Dance Tunes* (Kanawha 311), an album comprised of instrumental numbers learned from octogenarian Henry Reed, a West Virginia fiddler with whom Jabbour had apprenticed, and who provided a significant fraction of the Hollow Rock repertory. A second album, *The Hollow Rock String Band* (Rounder 0024), was issued in 1972 and featured Thompson and Jabbour, with Jim Watson on guitar. Hollow Rock tunes began to circulate among musicians throughout the country, and before

*Bobbie Thompson and Tommy Thompson, c. 1966.*



*Photo courtesy of The Old-Time Herald and Jesse Thompson Eustice.*





*Tommy playing 12-string guitar. Photo by John Menapace, c. 1964.  
Courtesy of Jesse Thompson Eustice.*

long such ancient strains as “Kitchen Girl,” “Hog-Eyed Man,” and “Over the Waterfall” could be heard on porches and at fiddlers’ conventions throughout the United States. In a 1984 interview, Thompson recalled his surprise the first time he realized that Hollow Rock was beginning to influence other musicians: “It was probably 1970 or ’71 before I started hearing those tunes around,” he said. “I remember one time walking down the street in Chapel Hill. There was some guy playing ‘Over the Waterfall.’ He had no idea where it was from. And David Bromberg put it on one of his albums, too. I just started hearing things like that and I knew that our album was making a difference in the world” (Bernhardt 81).

Thompson was also making a difference with his bold, melodic style of clawhammer banjo playing, as aspiring banjo pickers learned



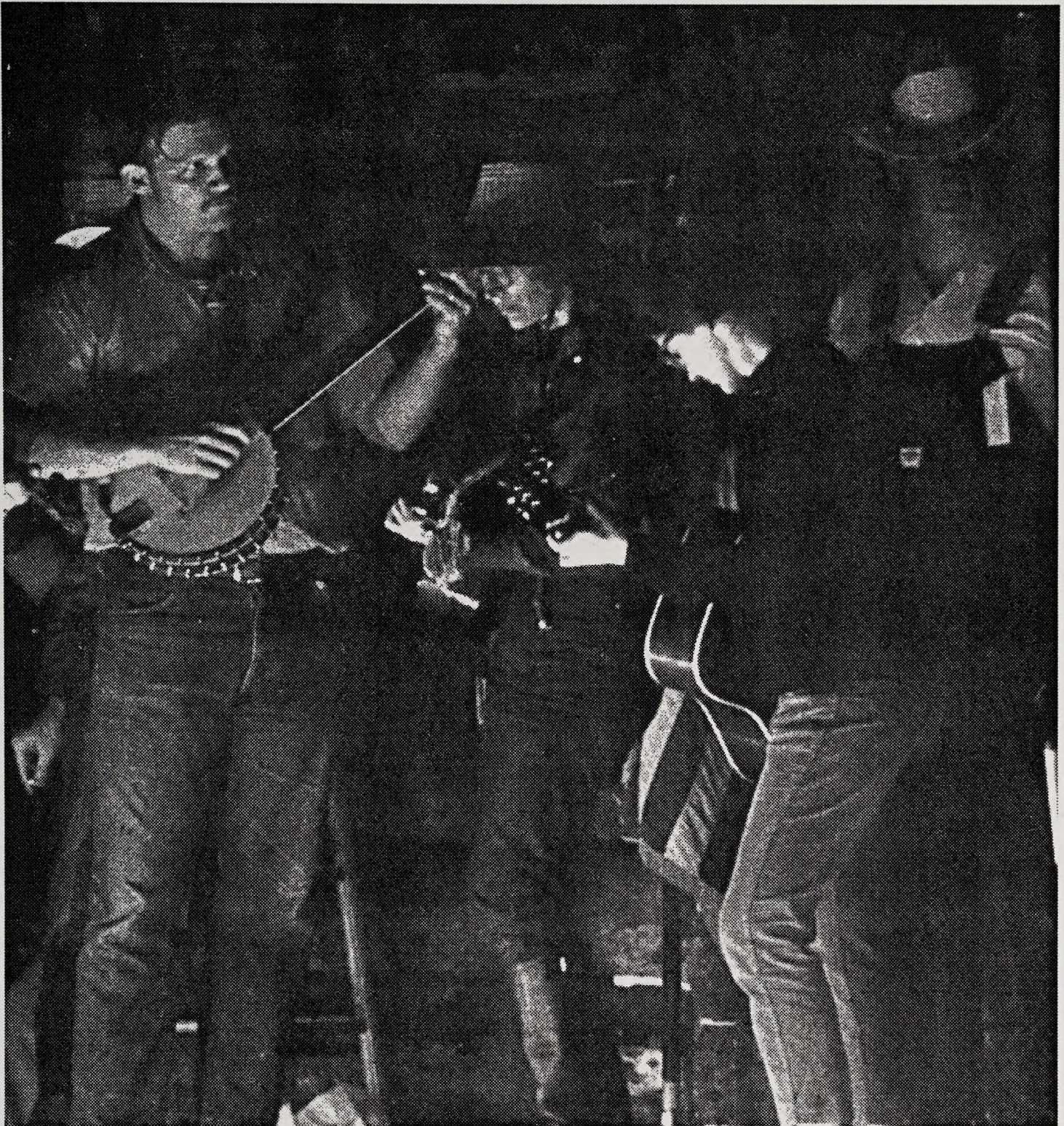
*(Left page) Carole Gumpert and Pete Gumpert on stage with (right page) Tommy Thompson and Bobbie Thompson and other musicians at the Galax Fiddler's Convention, c. 1964. Photo courtesy of The Old-Time Herald and Jesse Thompson Eustice.*



his licks from the recordings or by watching him play at fiddlers' conventions. His folklorist friend, Tom Carter, suggests that Thompson was "probably the first revival banjo player to devise a complicated melodic style of drop-thumb noting—a technique that elaborated on and expanded the traditional clawhammer method of limited drop-thumb noting, thereby making the banjo an equal partner to the fiddle and mandolin" (Carter 80).

After Hollow Rock dissolved, Thompson continued to perform locally and at fiddlers' conventions, including the prestigious gathering at Union Grove, where he took first prize in the World Champion Old Time Banjo contest in 1971. The next year, he joined with Bill Hicks and Jim Watson to form the Red Clay Ramblers, an ensemble devoted





to old-time Southern music with an emphasis on songs and singing. Their first album, *The Red Clay Ramblers with Fiddlin' Al McCanless*, was released on the Folkways label in 1974. With the addition of Craver and multi-instrumentalist Jack Herrick, who joined in 1976, the Ramblers were transformed into a versatile quintet capable of performing music as diverse as jazz, blues, show tunes, and fiddle-banjo breakdowns.

For twenty-two years, the Ramblers would be Thompson's artistic home, providing an ideal forum for the expression of his considerable talents and his interests in music and theater. Around Chapel Hill, the band was legendary for its lively concerts at such local haunts as the Cat's Cradle, Rhythm Alley, and The ArtsCenter of Carrboro. But the Ramblers were never just a local band; their reputation and fan base



spread far and wide as they toured throughout the US, Canada, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa.

An imposing presence as he stood center stage, Thompson captivated crowds with his erudite wit, his powerful banjo licks, and his warm and confident baritone. Many of the Ramblers' most requested songs, including "Merchant's Lunch," "Hot Buttered Rum," and "Twisted Laurel," originated from Thompson's pen. Ironically, "Twisted Laurel," the title track of the Ramblers' 1976 LP, presents an eerie foretelling of the memory loss Thompson would experience in his later years: "In a tar-paper shack out of town across the tracks / Stands an old used-up man trying to call something back / But his old memories fade like the city in the haze / And his days have flowed together like the rain."

In 1974, Thompson and the Ramblers began a long and productive involvement with musical theater, starring in the Off-Broadway hit, *Diamond Studs*, which detailed the life and times of outlaw Jesse James. For his dual role as Cole Younger and James' mother (for which he was arrayed in bonnet, beard, and dress!) Thompson earned critical praise from the *New York Times*. The band also enjoyed a long collaboration with playwright Sam Shepard, a long-time Ramblers fan who invited the band to write and perform music for the Broadway production of his play, *A Lie of the Mind*. The Ramblers wrote the score for Shepard's film, *Far North*, and wrote music for and appeared as a medicine show band in his film, *Silent Tongue*. Thompson's other theater projects included the plays, *Life on the Mississippi*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Texas*, and *Ear Rings*, a musical adaptation of Lee Smith's, novel, *Oral History*.

In 1984, Thompson wrote and starred in the one-man play, *The Last Song of John Proffit*. Thoughtful, witty, and insightful, the play examines race relations in the ante-bellum South from the perspective of the fictional title character, an aging banjo player who had worked with Dan Emmett, the Ohio minstrel credited with writing the Southern anthem, "Dixie." The play was a creative milestone for Thompson, who performed it at the Playmakers Theater at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, before taking it on the road.

In the early '90s, while the Ramblers were rehearsing for the Broadway production of *Fool Moon*, Thompson began experiencing



problems with memory, forgetting lines and at times becoming disoriented to his surroundings. He was diagnosed with the early onset of Alzheimer's-like dementia. By 1994, the disease had progressed to the point that Thompson decided to leave the Ramblers, although he continued to work on other projects in Chapel Hill. A play he was writing on the life of North Carolina banjo player and early country recording artist, Charlie Poole, was unfinished at the time of his death. Thompson played his last concert with the Red Clay Ramblers in September 1994 at The ArtsCenter of Carrboro. During Carrboro Day, in May 1998, Thompson performed with his daughter, Jesse Eustice; a month later, accompanied by Craver and Hicks, he gave his last public performance at Carrboro's *Fête de la Musique*.

In 1995, the North Carolina Folklore Society honored Thompson with a Brown-Hudson Folklore Award. Bland Simpson, another Red Clay Ramblers band member, wrote the citation presented by folklorist Cece Conway. Simpson applauds the work of his friend Tommy Thompson as a legacy of gifts that will continue to inspire and endure: "I have heard remarks...all over America, from people who have enjoyed and been moved by Tommy and his music, and who, because of him, have picked up a banjo or a guitar or a fiddle and learned to play. Because of Tommy Thompson, no telling how many old tunes that nearly disappeared live on, and so, because of his work and craft, our state's rich heritage is richer still" (Simpson 69).

Thompson is survived by his daughter, Jesse Thompson Eustice, and son, Tom Ashley Thompson, both of Durham. To ensure that their father's work will continue to be enjoyed and will be available for use in scholarly and artistic pursuits, his children have donated his notebooks, journals, John Proffit materials, and correspondence to the Southern Folklife Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. They have also helped to establish the Tommy Thompson Memorial Fund for the University's Curriculum in Folklore. Donations can be made to the Curriculum in Folklore, English Department, The Arts and Sciences Foundation, CB #6115, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-6115.



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- 8 *The Red Clay Ramblers with Fiddlin' Al McCanless* (Folkways) 1974.
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- Twisted Laurel* (Flying Fish) 1976.
- Merchant's Lunch* (Flying Fish) 1977.
- Chuckin' the Frizz (Live at the Cat's Cradle)* (Flying Fish) 1979.
- Hard Times* (Flying Fish) 1981.
- It Ain't Right* (Flying Fish) 1986.
- A Lie of the Mind* (Sugar Hill) 1986.
- Far North* (Sugar Hill) 1989.
- Rambler* (Sugar Hill) 1992.

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- Alan Jabbour, Sandy Bradley, and Tommy Thompson, *Sandy's Fancy* (Flying Fish) 1981.



**Tommy Thompson: Collector of Folksongs,  
Composer, and Banjo Player**

*– citation by Bland Simpson, presented by Cece Conway*

**T**ommy Thompson's Brown-Hudson Folklore Award Citation was presented by banjo scholar Cece Conway. The presentation was in two parts: a preliminary statement by Conway and a tribute from Bland Simpson, novelist and musician.

**Cece Conway:** I feel real privileged to be able to read Bland's citation. I said a bit about Tommy this morning, and I know better than to try to follow a Red Clay Rambler, so I'm going to make my remarks now before I read Bland's citation.

Along with his music and seasoned perspective and humor, one of the qualities of Tommy that I think is really important is one he's described himself. Which he says, "I think I was born with a sunny constitution." And I think that's very true, and it's one of the qualities that's personally meant the most to me about Tommy. And I think it's a real gift to his audiences. It's a quality that can make paying the telephone bill fun if you're with Tommy, and it's one that can make hot, sweaty field trips with young children and lost microphones a delightful adventure. So I think we're very fortunate in that quality that's his. And now I'm going to give it to you from Bland.

[Conway reads Bland Simpson's citation]: Tommy Thompson, receiving the Brown-Hudson Award, April First, 1995.

Twenty years ago this spring, Tommy Thompson and Jim Wann and I shared a dressing room during the New York run of our show *Diamond Studs* and, during this time, got to be great friends. Tommy had seen creative promise in allying his string band, the Red Clay Ramblers, with Jim's and my folk-rock ensemble, the Southern States Fidelity Choir, to stage *Diamond Studs* in Chapel Hill the previous fall, and now we were on West 43<sup>rd</sup> Street with the first of what would become a family of "musicians' theater" shows.



Tommy had already been playing the banjo for over a dozen years, having picked it up in New Orleans and brought it to North Carolina, where I was lucky enough to hear him play-at Hollow Rock, at Union Grove (the spring he won World Champion Old-time Banjo Player), and, not long thereafter, in my living room. And since our first theatrical alliance in *Diamond Studs*, I have seen Tommy portray figures as varied as Mark Twain's mentor, steamboat pilot Horace Bixby; John Proffit, the fictional friend and accompanist of Dan Emmet, the man who wrote "Dixie"; Shakespeare's Falstaff and the "rude mechanical" Bardolph in *Merry Wives of Windsor, Texas*, medicine-show banjoist in Sam Shepard's film, *Silent Tongue*, and himself in Shepard's play, *A Lie of the Mind*.

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In hundreds and hundreds of theaters, clubs, and concert halls, Tommy Thompson has taken the stage—and the house—by storm; and whether the hall was great or small, whether he was playing a Blue Ridge Mountain tune or one of his own originals, he has always clawhammered with the same verve and style. He has honored Nashville's Broadway with the energetic comic song "Merchant's Lunch," and he has honored New York's Broadway by performing there, at the Richard Rodgers Theatre during most of 1993 in *Fool Moon*, our Ramblers' collaboration with the clown mimes Irwin and Shiner.

There are a million memories of all this. Jack Herrick of the Red Clay Ramblers well remembered when the Ramblers were better known as "Tommy and them," and I remember well our fiddler, Clay Buckner, stopping by our room somewhere in Pennsylvania to visit before turning in and saying to Tommy, "Father Banjo, would you read to us from the Book of Gigs?"

It is a long and wonderful book, full of music and still being written. Just last month in New York City, the son of our *Diamond Studs* choreographer remembered that "Tommy Thompson strung my first guitar," adding, "Thanks to Tommy Thompson and all of you guys, I've always thought of North Carolina as a place where there were a lot of friendly people who got together and played great music and had a hell of a lot of fun."

I have heard remarks like that all over America, from people who have enjoyed and been moved by Tommy and his music, and who, because of him, have picked up a banjo or a guitar or a fiddle and learned



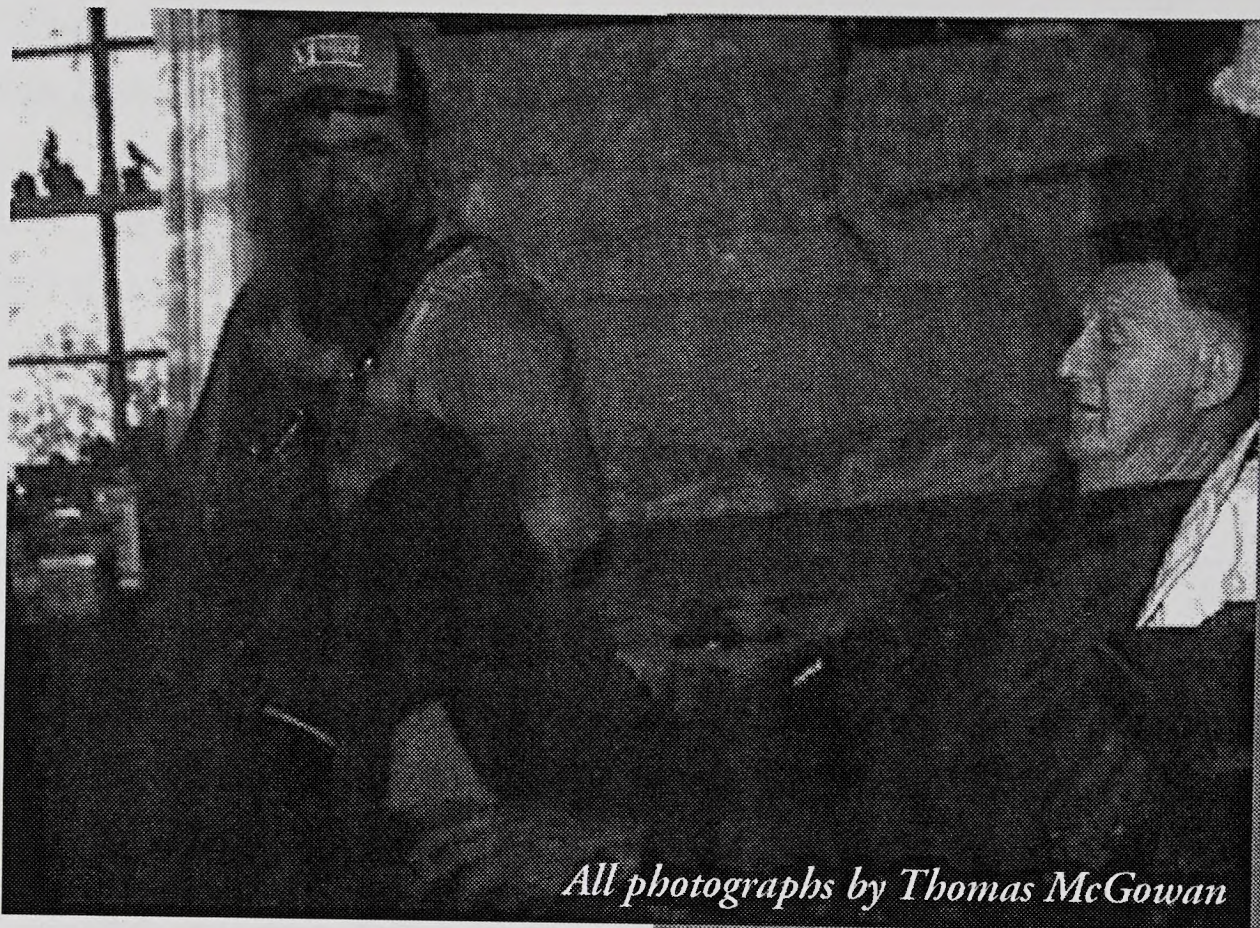
to play. Because of Tommy Thompson, no telling how many old tunes that nearly disappeared live on, and so, because of his work and craft, our state's rich heritage is richer still.

Congratulations, Tommy, from Oxford, Mississippi, where your fellow Ramblers—Chris, Clay, Jack, Mark, Rob, and I—are tonight, adding another line to Father Banjo's Book of Gigs and trying, as always, to spread joy with real American music.



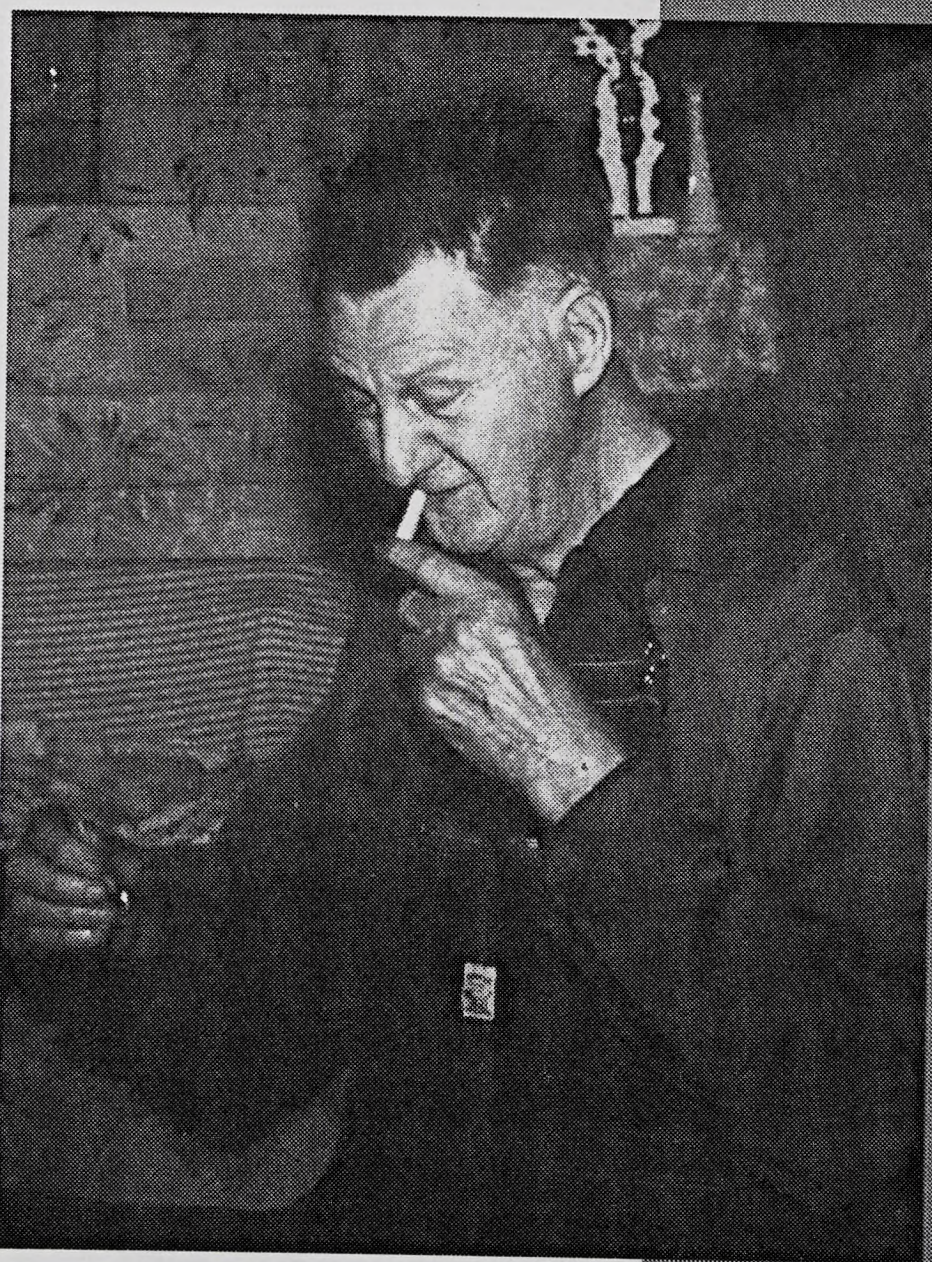
*"In hundreds and hundreds of theaters, clubs, and concert halls, Tommy Thompson has taken the stage—and the house—by storm; and whether the hall was great or small, whether he was playing a Blue Ridge Mountain tune or one of his own originals, he has always clawhammered with the same verve and style."*





*All photographs by Thomas McGowan*

*Ray and Orville Hicks together in the parlor-bedroom of Ray and Rosa's house. Orville continues Ray's telling of the Hicks-Harmon Family Jack Tales.*



*"Visits by Ray and his family to Orville's home are good memories of growing up. Orville's earliest memory is of a very tall lean man who enunciated 'G-o-o-l-ly' like no one else."*

*Ray Hicks at home. Wall designs were handpainted by Ray's wife, Rosa.*



## Remembering Ray Hicks

~ Orville Hicks and Thomas McGowan

The passing of Ray Hicks early on Easter morning has taken away one of the most distinctive voices in our state, in the Southern mountains, and in American storytelling circles. For his storytelling, Ray received the Brown-Hudson Folklore Award of the North Carolina Folklore Society in 1985, the North Carolina Folk Heritage Award from the North Carolina Arts Council in 1992, and the National Heritage Fellowship of the National Endowment for the Arts in 1983. Over many years, Ray was a special neighbor, bearer of folkways, and wonderful entertainer.

One of us Orville Hicks—enjoyed Ray’s company for a half century. As a boy, Orville lived across the ridge about a mile from Ray and Rosa’s house. Visits by Ray and his family to Orville’s home are good memories of growing up. Orville’s earliest memory is of a very tall lean man who enunciated “G-o-o-l-ly” like no one else. Despite the supervision of Orville’s strict Baptist-preacher father, Ray sneaked funny books to the youngsters, told them stories, and joked with them.

But the most significant meetings with Ray were at his unpainted two-story house on a beautiful stretch of land on the lower slopes below Beech Mountain. That house has become an icon of regional representation appearing in many film documentaries (including the Appalachian English episodes of a PBS film series, *The Story of English*), in paintings by noted regional artists, and in numerous photographs. Orville with his brothers went to Ray’s for haircuts, but also to enjoy the company of a great mountain host and entertainer.

Folklorist Joseph Sobol of East Tennessee State University has described how Ray “absorbed his stories in that house...not as performance events separated from the daily rhythms of life but as part of the imaginative ecology of his elders’ world” (“Jack in the Raw” 4). Orville Hicks, other neighbors, and a parade of outside visitors enjoyed



those stories, Ray's harmonica playing and singing, and his good company on the porch and in the parlor-bedroom decorated with Rosa Hicks' handpainted wall designs and Ray's woodstove with the special tin-can improvisations he made to improve the heating.

Many local men stopped at Ray's to pass the time, be entertained, and have a good time. Orville recalls his first visit to the house, tagging along with older brothers who were going for a haircut. When they arrived, Ray and his family were digging "taters," and everyone pitched in to help. Then they went up to the house for the haircuts. There was so much fun, storytelling, joking, and "harp"-playing that Orville couldn't wait for his brothers' hair to grow long enough for them to visit again.

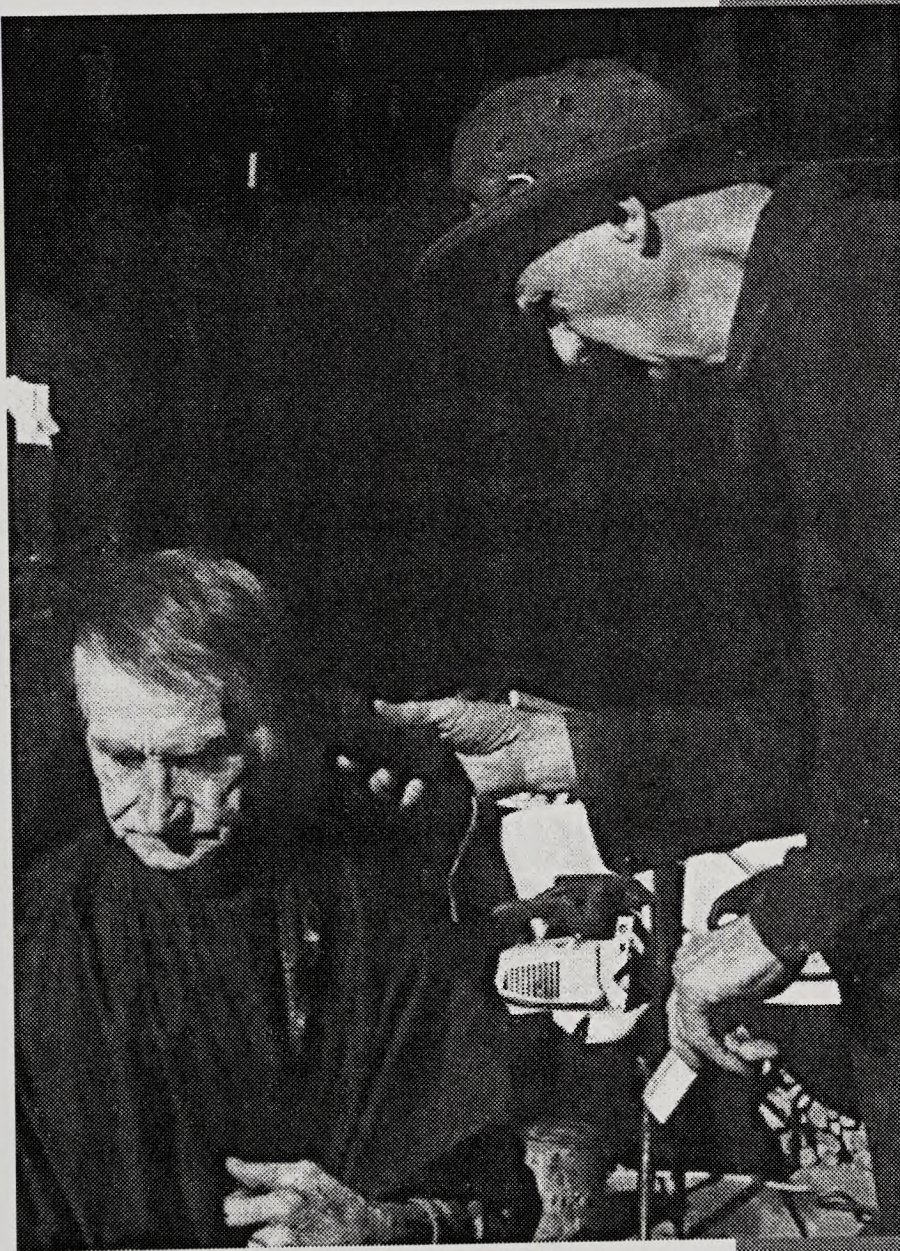
Performances by Ray Hicks are documented in a series of films, in a notable early recording by Sandy Paton and on other tapes, in the field recordings for Barbara McDermitt's School of Scottish Studies doctoral dissertation on him and the Jack Tales, and in many short television features. For many people, his storytelling lives in memories of folk festivals, programs at local schools, a session at the Appalachian Summer arts festival in Boone, and regular annual appearances at the National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough, Tennessee, where he became, in Joseph Sobol's words, "the archetypal embodiment of storytelling tradition" (*Storyteller's Journey* 110).

For Orville Hicks, Ray was an uncle-figure, friend, and master teacher, who handed on Jack Tales, one of the most notable American folktale forms. Orville says, "If you got to hear Ray telling a Jack Tale, you got to thinking that Ray was in the tale and you were in the tale with him." His passing is a great loss for all of us, but his heritage will live on in the tale telling of another generation of Jack Tale tellers and the memories of many people in professional storytelling and academic folklore communities, but most of all among neighbors and his many friends here, across the nation, and even across the ocean. Bedads, Ray Hicks was a giant of a storyteller and always fun to visit and hear.





*The Hicks home with Ray cutting hair out front. The Hicks home has been the scene of local gatherings and visits by outsider folklorists since the 1940s.*



*Ray Hicks cutting hair. A haircut with Ray was always an event with storytelling, joking, and fun.*

*“Many local men stopped at Ray’s to pass the time, be entertained, and have a good time. Orville recalls his first visit to the house, tagging along with older brothers who were going for a haircut.”*



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*About the Authors*

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Orville Hicks is a neighbor of Ray Hicks, and a traditional storyteller who learned from him. Thomas McGowan is a folklorist in Appalachian State University's Department of English.

Editor's Note: Orville Hicks and Tom McGowan are frequent visitors to eastern North Carolina where Orville's storytelling has a wide and appreciative audience. Orville Hicks also is the uncredited photographer for the smiling image of Tom McGowan at "McGowans X Rds." (Pitt County) that appears on page 65 of *NCFJ* 49.2 2002.



*"Yeah, you see, Jack can be everybody, when you get on it right.  
I'm Jack.  
I've been Jack.  
I'm Jack right now.  
I know ever trick and turn of the mountains, you know."*

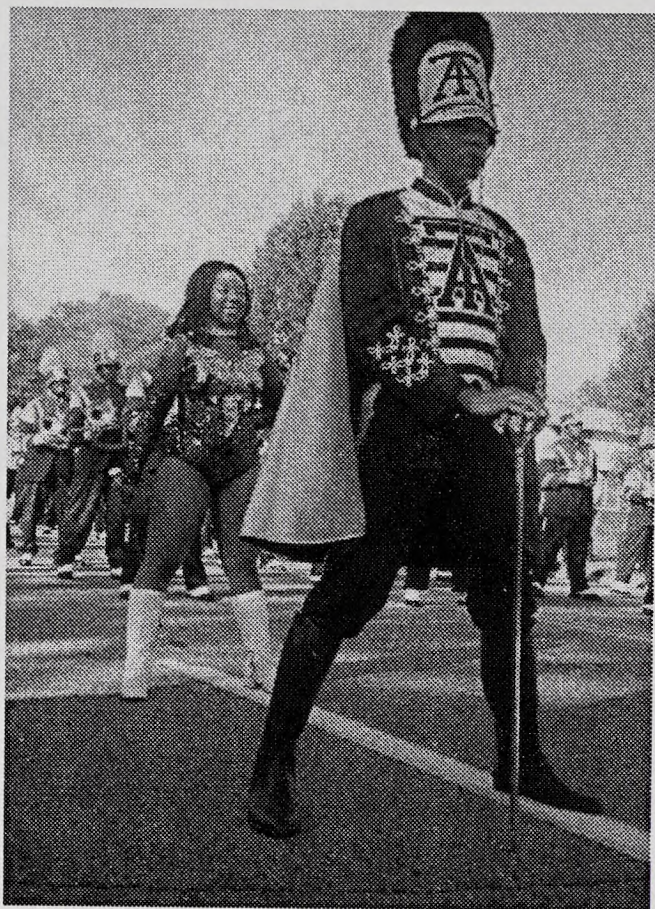


*~ Ray Hicks*

Storyteller Ray Hicks is a National Heritage Fellow and North Carolina Folk Heritage Award winner. Photo by Jon Wilmesherr.

Photo and text on this page reprinted from *NCFJ* 38.2 (1991).





*"HBCU bands have developed a widely popular performance tradition that blends musicianship, drilling, dance, showmanship, and pageantry in a way that speaks to the values and aesthetics that have sustained African American cultural art forms for centuries."*

*All photos by William Lewis.*



## Marching to the Beat of a Different Drum: Performance Traditions of Historically Black College and University Marching Bands

~ *William Lewis*

I recall attending my first football game at North Carolina A&T State University in the fall of 1999. I was running late due to traffic, which I have since learned is typical in the ever-expanding city of Greensboro, North Carolina. I had already missed the first quarter, and the second was well underway. After parking, I grabbed my bag stuffed with a camera, video recorder, film and batteries, and hastily made my way down Lindsay Street to Sullivan, where the Aggie Stadium is located. A hundred or more people were wandering around outside the stadium—tailgating and visiting the several dozen vendors that lined the streets. These vendors were selling everything from the latest popular gospel and hip-hop CDs, to blue and gold “Aggie Pride” t-shirts, African woodcarvings, Kente print apparel, and posters of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and other prominent African Americans. My mouth watered as I passed up offers of fried catfish plates, barbecue chicken and ribs, pulled pork sandwiches topped with slaw, and other traditionally Southern foods.

I was surprised to see approximately a hundred more people waiting in lines at the gate to purchase tickets. I thought this to be odd considering how late it was in the game. Finally, with two minutes left in the second quarter, I made my way into the stands, which seat 23,000 at full capacity. As the last thirty seconds of the second quarter ticked off the clock, I noticed mass movement all around the stadium. People were not leaving their seats to visit the restroom or to get refreshments. Rather, we were busy shuffling over in our bleachers and making room for the scores of people now filing in to find a seat.

North Carolina A&T’s “Blue and Gold Marching Machine” was lined up opposite the home sideline, 170 members strong. They were led by three drum majors who were distinguishable from the rest of the band by their tall, fuzzy hats, knee-high black boots, and gold capes



with navy silhouettes of a bulldog (located between the shoulder blades) and crossbones (near the lower back). Each drum major carried a long, silver baton with an oblong head and held a whistle tightly between his or her teeth. An emcee came over the loudspeaker and announced in perfectly timed meter and ascending intonation, "It's gonna be mean. It's gonna be clean. It's called what?" The A&T fans and emcee answered simultaneously, "The Aggie Leannnnnnnnnn!" The crowd went wild as the entire band leaned backwards (some almost touching their heads to the ground) for a full two-second count—a feat that is difficult enough without having to hold an instrument at the same time. For the next fifteen to twenty minutes, these musical athletes executed precision drills and musical scores, high-step marching, and stop-the-show dance routines that left the majority of the crowd on their feet and energized. It was becoming evident why so many people had been milling around before halftime—they had come to see the bands.

20 I came to learn that this interest in the bands was widely shared among most Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) today. "Whereas football was a big, big thing at a lot of the schools I've attended, bands in the predominantly black schools are the highlight of people's college careers," begins Ellard Forrester, Assistant Band Director at North Carolina A&T. "Even when the football team isn't doing well, people will come just to see the band. In many situations they will leave after halftime" (Forrester 1999). Similarly, Jerry Davis, a trombone player for A&T, recollects a time that the band had to leave after halftime to do a show at a nearby high school. "People that paid to get into the game left too! They were upset that we had left—they were infuriated! It was in the newspapers and everything. At our next game the people in the stands next to us asked, 'Y'all aren't leaving this time are you?' That's when we noticed that the crowd really does come to see the band" (Davis and Black 1999). In fact, nearly 50,000 fans attended the 2002 "Battle of the Bands"—a marching band competition—at the Veterans Memorial Stadium in Jackson, Mississippi, that featured bands from a number of predominately black colleges and high schools across the South.<sup>1</sup> In December of 2002, 20th Century Fox released the well-reviewed film "Drumline," which is based on a fictional HBCU marching band from Atlanta, Georgia, and features performances by many existing HBCU bands.



HBCU bands have developed a widely popular performance tradition that blends musicianship, drilling, dance, showmanship, and pageantry in a way that speaks to the values and aesthetics that have sustained African American cultural art forms for centuries. The HBCU marching band tradition emerges from a long history of black participation in military bands, provincial and municipal brass bands, minstrel bands, and concert bands.

*From Whence They Came: Brief Historical Overview of African American Marching Band Traditions*

By the time the Civil War had begun in 1861, new brass instruments were being used universally among the military bands that were beginning to thrive in America. Historian Eileen Southern says that in the Union Army, “one of the first acts of the white commanding officers of Negro regiments was to procure instruments and music instructors for the formation of bands” (207). Through parades and other public performances, these bands helped recruit other black men to join the Union Army. According to Southern, by the war’s conclusion in 1865 “more than 185,000 black men had been inducted into the army as the ‘United States Colored Troops’” (205). Each of the black regiments had their own band (Southern 207).

Many black regimental bands were disbanded soon after the Civil War. Although some of these ex-bandsmen certainly stayed on to form the first black units to be organized into the United States Regular Army, others attached themselves to civilian bands or toured with road shows (Southern 255). By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, marching bands had become thoroughly integrated into American society. According to music historian William Schaefer, during this time bands of well-trained ex-military musicians were found in almost every town and village in America. These bands were playing for political rallies, circuses, minstrel and medicine shows, carnivals, picnics, dances, athletic contests, reunions, seasonal parades, serenade fairs, and holiday gatherings. Schaefer says, “every military troop, quasi-military drill team, volunteer fire squad, lodge, or social club had its auxiliary band to swell holiday pageantry” (8).

From about 1830 until 1900 minstrelsy reigned as one of the most popular forms of entertainment in the United States. First-rate bands



frequently toured with minstrel troupes and vaudeville companies (Southern 255). "Although troupes composed of black entertainers date back to the 1840s," says Eileen Southern, "it was not until 1865 that the first permanent black minstrel troupes were formed" (229). Three of the largest black owned and managed companies were "the Hicks and Sawyer Minstrels, the McCabe and Young Minstrels, and the Richards and Pringle Minstrels" (Malone 1996: 54). The minstrel stage offered blacks an economically viable profession and an opportunity to cultivate their musical talents. Among those that began their careers as minstrel performers were "Father of the Blues' W. C. Handy, vaudevillian Tom Fletcher, musical comedy and ragtime composer Ernest Hogan, Gertrude 'Ma' Rainey, Bert Williams, and Bessie Smith" (Malone 54).

W. C. Handy joined Mahara's Minstrels as a cornetist in 1896, and in time he was appointed as the director of the troupe's forty-two musicians. Minstrel shows were held in the evenings; therefore, troupes would bait the public's interest in the afternoons by staging elaborate parades through downtown. The minstrel band strutted along and provided the procession with its spirited marching tunes (Handy 35-38). Handy describes one of these minstrel parades:

The parade itself was headed by the managers in their four-horse carriages. Doffing silk hats and smiling their jeweled smiles, they acknowledged with easy dignity the small flutter of polite applause their high-stepping horses provoked. After them came the carriage in which the stars rode. The "walking gents" followed, that exciting company which included comedians, singers, and acrobats. They in turn were followed by the drum major—not an ordinary drum major beating time for a band, mind you, but a performer out of the books, an artist with the baton. His twirling stick suggested a bicycle wheel revolving in the sun. Occasionally he would give it a toss and then recover the glistening affair with the same flawless skill. The drum major in a minstrel show was a character to conjure with; not infrequently he stole the parade. Our company had two such virtuosi; in addition to twirling their batons, they added the new wrinkle of tossing them back and forth to each other as they marched. (Handy 37-38)



Whether being performed by all-black troupes or by whites in “black-face,” minstrelsy helped disseminate the African American style of music and dance all across the nation (Stearns and Stearns 43).

While minstrelsy had indeed captivated the attention of the American public during the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, brass band music had also become a common source of entertainment. Former Union Army bandmaster Patrick S. Gilmore is often credited as being the catalyst for the brass band movement in the United States. During the late 1800s, Gilmore toured the nation with a first-rate concert/marching band and staged numerous large-scale musical extravaganzas (Schafer 2). Band historian H. W. Schwartz reported that Gilmore used a brass band of approximately five hundred pieces to present his “Grand National Concert” in New Orleans, on March 4, 1864 (51). Gilmore’s World Peace Jubilee in Boston, first produced in 1872, provided many black entertainers an opportunity to perform for the American public (Southern 253). Among those who performed during Gilmore’s Jubilees were numerous all-black bands and professional jubilee troupes, such as the Fisk University Jubilee Singers and the Hampton Students (Southern 218).<sup>2</sup> By the time Patrick S. Gilmore died in 1892, the former director of the United States Marine Band, John Philip Sousa, had formed his own concert band and was touring extensively around the country and world. William Schafer says that, building upon Gilmore’s legacy, Sousa’s international success as a bandleader confirmed, “there was a burgeoning industry for touring bands as major entertainment vehicles” (15). According to Jacqui Malone, “by the last decade of the nineteenth century there were approximately ten thousand bands in the United States, many of them marching bands” (1996: 137). This time period—between the 1880s and 1910—is considered by many to be the “golden age of the brass band in America” (Schafer 2).

Due to the general popularity of brass bands, the widespread availability of black military-trained musicians, and an overabundance of cheap military wind instruments in the post-Civil War period, the marching band tradition also flourished in African American communities. Many African American benevolent societies and organizations formed bands to help raise money for their own causes. One such all-black boy’s band was the Jenkins Orphanage Band of



Charleston, South Carolina. Rev. Daniel Joseph Jenkins formed the first band in the 1890s to help raise money for his orphanage. Before long, the band's popularity gave rise to the formation of subsidiary units. At times the orphanage had as many as five groups on the road at once (Chilton 2-3).

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The city of New Orleans became a hotbed of fine black brass bands during the post-Civil War period. Black Reconstruction leader P. B. S. Pinchback was an avid supporter of several benevolent societies in New Orleans in the 1880s (Schaefer 10; Malone 1996: 180). More than 226 African American societies were active in New Orleans, including "racial improvement societies; lodges of the Odd Fellows, Masons, Knights Templar, and Eastern Star; social and literary clubs; baseball clubs; rowing clubs; militia companies; religious societies; orphan aid societies; and benevolent societies" (Malone 1996: 180). These societies helped galvanize the marching band tradition in New Orleans by hiring black bands to perform at outdoor social events, including picnics, parades, dances, funerals, weddings, and political rallies (Malone 1996: 180). New Orleans jazzmen Lester Young and Sidney Bechet found employment in carnival bands playing for sideshows earlier in their musical careers. "Eubie Blake performed briefly in 1901 as a buck dancer, musician, and singer on the portable wagon of Dr. Frazier's Medicine Show," says Jacqui Malone (1996: 68). The incomparable Louis Armstrong played many mournful hymns while marching in funeral parades in New Orleans in his youth (Burns and Ward 2000: 46).<sup>3</sup>

The black brass bands of New Orleans were not permanently organized groups, but rather a mix of African American musicians from a variety of geographic, occupational, ethnic and economic backgrounds. According to Jacqui Malone, many "Creoles of color, who lived primarily in the downtown French-oriented section of the city, absorbed a rich mix of Franco-American cultural elements." Consequently, "sons of Creoles often studied with musicians from the French Opera Company and also played in the string trios, brass bands, and dance orchestras of the downtown district" (Malone 1996: 138). While some of the earliest municipal bands in New Orleans consisted of such formally trained Creoles of color and freedman who could read music and play sophisticated techniques, by the turn of the twentieth century, smaller, self-taught provincial bands emerged from rural areas with a unique



sound, style, and repertoire that provided the stylistic fodder for the eventual growth of jazz (Malone 1996: 138-139).

While documenting several rural brass bands in Alabama in the 1950s, Frederic Ramsey, Jr., discovered that most rural bands played music by ear and patterned their style and repertoire after their surroundings. In the liner notes to his recordings for Folkways records, Ramsey explains:

The music played by members of these early plantation brass bands was based on song—they blew singing horns. Their repertoire came, not from the white man's stock of patriotic sheet music, but from church and secular songs. From the church side, they played spirituals, jubilees, and possibly, some early chants. They had probably sung them in their churches and homes before blowing them through their horns. From the everyday, or secular life, they adapted rags, reels, blues, and ballads. (qtd. in Schafer 14)

The style of these self-taught rural bandsmen was highly improvisatory and strongly influenced by the vocal music of the black churches, work songs, field hollers, and reels (Malone 1996: 138). They replaced the voice using their instruments—recreating the tonal allusion of song by “scooping, sliding, whining, growling, and falsetto effects” (Southern 364). Other characteristics included offbeat phrasing, polyrhythms, melodies and countermelodies, syncopation, and call-and-response patterns—all of which are hallmarks of other forms of African American vernacular music (Schafer 13-14). Prior to 1900, the traditions of self-trained provincial bands and formally trained municipal bands were firmly established in the New Orleans musical milieu (Malone 1996: 140). In the first decade of the twentieth century, there began an exodus of black bandsmen from New Orleans and other areas of the South to the North. Dance hall venues in Northern cities, like New York's famous Cotton Club, Clef Club, Tempo Club, and Savoy Ballroom, were attracting many of these talented former brass band musicians. However, when the United States entered World War I in 1917, many of these dance bandleaders joined the service, leading some of them to lead military bands (Malone 1996: 141).



In June 1916, Colonel William Hayward organized an all-black National Guard unit in New York state. Hayward was serving as public service commissioner for New York City at the time and was familiar with the black leaders and communities of the city, especially the ever-growing Harlem district. Thus, the 15th Infantry Regiment (Colored) of the New York National Guard came into existence. Having “no rifles, ammunition, uniforms, armory to drill in, headquarters for recruitments, or troops,” Hayward began pursuing ways to recruit and raise funds to support his regiment (Badger 141). According to Reid Badger, “Colonel Hayward understood from the first that successful recruiting depended in large part on showmanship, and that meant parades and uniforms, and the stirring music of a military brass band” (142). Consequently, Hayward charged Lieutenant James Reese Europe, whom he knew had a reputation as one of the most talented dance orchestra leaders in New York, with the task of organizing an army band of the same caliber of his famed Clef Club and Temp Club groups (Badger 143; Southern 350).

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Having recruited a large group of talented black bandsmen, including drum major/famed songwriter Noble Sissle, Lieutenant Europe and his 369th Infantry “Hellfighters” band gained incredible fame throughout France for their syncopated rhythms and jazz-spirited versions of written standards; they were invited to play in Paris at the Theatre des Champs-Élysées in 1918 (Malone 1996: 143). Jacqui Malone says, “While white-American soldiers of World War I ardently strove to march like well-oiled war machines, like battle-ready robots, James Reese Europe’s black bandsmen of the 369th Regiment stepped to the beat of a different drummer” (1990: 59). According to dance historians John Szwed and Morton Marks, African American drill sergeants of World War I, such as Lt. Europe, introduced melody and foot-stomping syncopation into military cadence-counting, which permanently altered the standard European marching call that had existed for centuries (32).

Europe’s “Harlem Hellfighters” band won critical acclaim in the United States when it returned home and marched for the first time down Fifth Avenue in New York during a parade on May 12, 1919. A reporter for the *New York Times* wrote in an editorial that Lt. Europe had assembled a group that “all Americans swore, and some Frenchmen admitted, was the best military band in the world” (Southern 352).



Returning home from the war, many of these military trained bandsmen were solicited to join the faculty of the budding music departments of black colleges and universities.<sup>4</sup>

Since Emancipation, newly freed blacks across the South were exploring their options for social and economic advancement, one of which was attending schools established exclusively for blacks by religious and non-sectarian organizations largely from the north. "For the most part these institutions maintained excellent music programs," says Eileen Southern (221). Like the professional jubilee troupes, small bands were formed in the burgeoning black colleges and universities to help recruit students and raise money for programs. Some of these early black collegiate bands included the Alabama State Collegians, the Florida A&M State Collegians, and the Kentucky State Collegians. Perhaps the earliest black college marching band existed at Tuskegee Normal School circa 1890—the Tuskegee Normal School Brass Band (Harland, Kaufman, and Smock 49). While many of these early bands were student-led and informal, they became more professional as the years progressed.

Author Ralph Ellison attended Tuskegee Institute during the 1930s, where he majored in music and played trumpet in the band. He recalls how the band at another Alabama school for blacks, Alabama State University in Montgomery, had become so popular that it caused a rift between the band program and the college's administration. He explains, "the state of Alabama didn't support the college adequately, so the orchestra would go out and raise money .... The band was so successful in the North that they decided to go professional, which led to real contention between them and the President of Alabama State. He forced them to give up the name 'Alabama State Collegians' and they took the name of their leader, Erskine Hawkins" (qtd. in Welburn 12).

Many of America's predominately white colleges and universities had some form of a band that performed for school ceremonies and social and athletic events.<sup>5</sup> Music historian Kenneth Berger says that as these collegiate bands developed they "became attached to the military of R.O.T.C. departments, or in a few instances, unofficially sponsored by the athletic department" (Berger 445). Outdoor ceremonies and sporting events were conducive to wind-band performances. As American football evolved into a major spectator sport in many colleges and universities around the turn of the twentieth century, the playing field





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*"The highly syncopated, foot-stomping, body-moving rhythms that had defined the music of black military bands, provincial and municipal brass bands, minstrel bands, and concert bands over the past century was slowly morphing into a new band tradition on the campuses of Historically Black Colleges and Universities."*



provided a perfect stage for the marching bands' performances. The bands' volume and coordinated mass movements created spectacles with both visual and aural appeal. Led by veterans, these early marching band performances were primarily extensions of military drilling exercises, featuring block formations and corps style marching.<sup>6</sup>

In 1907, Maj. Nathaniel Clark Smith "was commissioned a captain in the United States Army and joined the military faculty at Tuskegee Institute, where he organized bands, ensembles, choral groups, and instrumental ensembles, and toured widely with the groups" (Southern 301). Smith is considered to be one of the first African Americans to hold the band director's position with faculty status at a historically black school. "Before starting his teaching career," says Jacqui Malone, "Smith traveled internationally with minstrel companies and also directed several military bands" (1996: 145). After leaving Tuskegee, Smith joined the faculty at Wendell Phillips High School in Chicago, "where he taught many future jazz musicians, including Ray Nance, Milt Hinton, Nat Cole, and Eddie South" (Malone 1996: 145).

In 1918, Captain Frank Drye took over the reins at Tuskegee. Captain Frank Drye was a veteran of Lieutenant James Reese Europe's famous "Harlem Hellfighters" band during World War I and became the "best known, black college-band director in the country during the years 1918-30" (Malone 1990: 64). Captain Drye trained scores of students who later became successful bandmasters at a variety of other institutions.<sup>7</sup> Among the students Captain Drye mentored while on faculty at Tuskegee was Phillmore Mallard "Shorty" Hall, who eventually taught Dizzy Gillespie in North Carolina (Malone 1996: 145). So begins the cultivation of a formal process for training young musicians in America's predominately black educational institutions.

While some historically black colleges and universities hired veteran military bandsmen to lead their music programs, others dipped into the pool of top-notch musicians traveling with minstrel troupes and on vaudeville circuits for their band leaders. On June 29, 1900, W. C. Handy was playing the cornet in the Mahara's Minstrels band when the chancellor for the Agricultural and Mechanical College in Huntsville, Alabama, recruited him to join the faculty and direct the band, orchestra and vocal music programs (Handy 57-58). In the early years, most predominately black educational institutions were run by Northern



whites who often preferred the European classics to American contemporary music. W. C. Handy, however, felt that contemporary forms, such as minstrel music, had a significant musical contribution. Therefore, Handy went out of his way to help others, especially whites, appreciate this and other forms of American and African American contemporary music. Handy explains:

I rendered a program one evening in the chapel, but I had a secret plan to include a stirring ragtime number, "My Ragtime Baby," which our minstrel band had featured. It was written by a Detroit Negro, Fred Stone. I rewrote this high stepper and programmed it "Greetings to Toussaint L' Overture," so as the manuscript would create the impression of classical music without changing a note of the original. It did the trick. The students couldn't sit still, nor could the teachers. The president himself patted his feet. At the conclusion, he remarked, "My, my, what a delightful program. Mr. Handy is the best band teacher we've had since the days of Mr. Still (referring to the father of William Grant Still). Let's have 'Greetings to Toussaint L'Overture' once more." I was only too happy to comply with his request, but explained how I had tricked them and made them appreciate the potentialities of ragtime by giving it a high-sounding name. (64)

In her interviews with members of Florida A&M's first marching band, Jacqui Malone discovered that many black college bands during the early 1900s were adopting the performance style of the popular black minstrel bands (1990: 63). Nathan B. Young, Jr., one of the original members of Florida A&M's first, sixteen piece marching band (1910 to 1915), elaborated on this relationship for Malone:

The minstrel bands were supermusicians and the amateurs would follow behind them and watch them. And they began to learn and imitate what the minstrel bands did .... In the last three years we were beginning to use syncopation. But in the early days we played straight band music from the books put out by the Germans. Of course the black musicians put on curls and did things, especially with the trombone. So the moment they



started to play, they put in personal touches. You could tell whether it was a black band or a white band in the early days .... The minstrel shows came in and they influenced us. The black school bands were playing more like minstrel bands as the time went on. (Malone 1990: 64)

The commingling of band traditions helped raise the bar on musicianship. "Many minstrel men joined army bands and the army bands in turn gave the minstrels better musicians," says W. C. Handy. "Everything was on the upgrade musically speaking" (65).

Predominately black educational institutions continued to see slow but steady growth in their music programs over the next half century. These programs included concert, symphonic and marching bands, as well as choirs and jazz ensembles. The highly syncopated, foot-stomping, body-moving rhythms that had defined the music of black military bands, provincial and municipal brass bands, minstrel bands, and concert bands over the past century was slowly morphing into a new band tradition on the campuses of Historically Black Colleges and Universities. By the early 1960s, the collective style of black college marching bands had firmly taken root as a distinctive performance tradition that was different from their predominately white college band counterparts.

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### *The Emergent Tradition*

Today, some of the largest venues showcasing young black marching band talent are the football stadiums of Historically Black Colleges and Universities. HBCU band performances meld African values and aesthetics with European musical traditions to form a distinctly African American art form. The high degree of showmanship, pageantry, broad musical competence, and intense competition not only offer audiences a unique brand of superlative entertainment, but also create a public and celebratory way to reaffirm community and perpetuate common values. Consequently, these performances help frame and sustain game day as a vital, distinct, and dynamic cultural event.

Marching band activities among HBCUs vary little in their essential components. They follow a basic form with some slight variations, featuring dramatic processions to and from the field, sectional battles, half-time field shows, and a fifth quarter competition.



North Carolina A&T State University's "Marching Blue and Gold Machine" meet at Frazier Hall on game days to tune up, have a group prayer, get in formation, and march to the Aggie Stadium—a distance of about nine city blocks. "It's a tradition to march to the field on game day," says Dr. Johnny Hodge, North Carolina A&T's Director of Bands. "They [the public] can watch us as we march to the field," (Hodge 1999).

After filing into their respective "ranks," band members are aptly prepared for battle. They are all in uniform, their instruments are in hand, and their attitudes are adjusted. When the Head Drum Major calls them to attention, game day officially begins for band members and the seriousness of performance is manifest on their faces. "There's no cuteness in the band," says Joy Campbell, an A&T flute player. "You can't be cute. Always got to have a war face" (Campbell). Some of the band members appear to be grimacing in an exaggerated manner. "That's basically our game day face when we are outside lining up and getting into attention," explains Dominic Stephens, an A&T trombone player. "We call it our 'dog face.' It is an ugly looking face" (Stephens). Members of the "Marching Machine" develop their "dog faces" as freshman during band camp—held two weeks in advance of each fall semester. "Mainly it is for freshman because it is part of discipline," continues Stephens. "It is to let them know that when you are lined up and part of the ranks there is no conniving or looking around at your friends" (Stephens). Oftentimes, well before practice begins during the week, the freshman band members are required to stand at attention on the field wearing their "dog faces."

Although "dog faces" are primarily required of freshmen, on game days band members of all ages put on these faces to show the viewing public and the opposing band their new attitude. "On game days, when we are marching down we are basically relaxed," continues Stephens. "But when we get to the street right before marching towards the stadium, it's, like, 'dog faces.' You have this mean look on your face and you are ready to take care of business. That is basically what you keep while you are in the ranks and marching to let people know that you don't want to mess with them right now because you are real serious. It is a sort of a small intimidator, so to speak" (Stephens).

With a series of perfectly timed short blasts on the whistle, the Head Drum Major marks the tempo. After several sharp raps on the snare



drums the entire percussion section joins in the cadence and carries the band into the first measures of the march. The high knee lifts (90 degrees) and the flash of the instruments as they swing like pendulums across their upper bodies are visually stimulating techniques that add flair to an otherwise standard military maneuver of marching.

Placing their mouthpieces to their lips, the band bursts into the opening measures of a marching tune. With the power brasses out front playing at full volume, the notes of the tune echo off the brick walls of campus buildings and resonate down the busy streets. In an instant, spectators appear from everywhere. People step out of buildings, lean their heads out of their dorm rooms, stroll around the corners from adjacent streets, and gather on sidewalks to get a look at the “Blue and Gold Marching Machine.” Now, almost everyone within the nine blocks to the Aggie Stadium has heard the fanfare and awaits the procession.

Shouts ring out from the crowds of spectators, who call out the names of individual band members, request particular songs, and ask the band to “break it down” and “freak it.” Some spectators dance in place on the sidewalks. Others get involved by forming an equivalent of a “second line” in the New Orleans brass band tradition and follow alongside, behind, and ahead of the band. During a procession on North Carolina A&T’s Homecoming in 2001, I watched as two young men stepped off the sidewalks and filed in directly behind the band. They acted as if they too were playing instruments, and mimicked the band’s marching style with high knee lifts and exaggerated torso movements. The crowd erupted in cheers and applause, which encouraged others to join in. Within minutes there was a group of about a dozen people—all ages and sexes—following behind the band—marching, strutting, and dancing.

The procession gains headway as the marchers turn down Sullivan Street. The Aggie Stadium is now in view and the number of spectators has quadrupled. “The crowd kind of tells you when you are performing,” says A&T trombone player Deana Marshall. “When you are marching in and the crowd gathers to watch the band, that’s showtime” (Marshall and Bynum). Conscious their actions are subject to evaluation by the public, marchers raise their knees a little higher, play a little louder, strut a little more, and put on their best “dog face.” The crowd goes wild as the band stops and “breaks it down” with a choreographed dance



routine and “Aggie Pride” chant. By combining music with dance, these processions become elaborate productions with a high degree of energy and showmanship that leaves the crowd riveted. “I enjoy seeing the people so happy and so excited,” says Deana Marshall. “Everybody wants to dance with [us] when we break it down, with the drummers doing their part and the band dancing in the street. The people, that’s what they look for. That’s why some people get out of bed, just to see the band break it down. And that gives you motivation. They are your audience and you are there to perform for them” (Marshall and Goins).

34 | A similar procession follows the completion of the 5th quarter—a post-game competition between the bands—and does not end until the entire band is back inside the doors of Frazier Hall. Anticipating the band’s next move, a large crowd gathers in the courtyard of Frazier Hall to watch and encourage the marchers as they pass through the “tunnel.” The percussion sections of the band strike up a sequence of intricate polymetric cadences and make a “tunnel” by forming two lines facing one another. The bandsmen pass through the “tunnel” one section at a time. Each section’s entrance into the “tunnel” is a dramatic performance, featuring both choreographed and improvised routines with highly stylized steps, turns, stomps, kicks, spins, dances, and “struts.” For instance, one person might lead his section into the “tunnel” and do a flashy move, while those behind him either repeat the move or modify it. “We call that ‘catching it from the front,’ explains Deana Marshall. “I do what the person in front of me does, but not exactly. I try to think of something better to add to outdo him—so I spin harder, or flip my plume. It’s just being flashy, once again for the crowd” (Marshall and Goins). The “dog faces,” “struts,” and personal stylized moves in the tunnel function to highlight individual expressivity, while other aspects of the routines emphasize the collective identity of each section. “The trombone section of the band is called ‘Freight Train,’” says NC A&T trombonist Derrick Black. “We’ll line up and march in, rotating our trombones in a circle so that we look like we a train passing through the tunnel” (Black). These elaborate “tunnel” performances occur several times during game day and mark the coming and going of the band. They are very popular among the spectators and have become highly anticipated performance events.



Pre- and post-game processions delineate a time and space separate from everyday life where African American culture is encapsulated, intensified, and performed in a very public manner. Set particularly within the realm of African American expression, these processions declare all public space as performance space, where even the most perfunctory activities such as going to and coming from the game are done with a sense of style, attitude, and grace. "Everything about this band is for show," says Jerry Davis. "Marching down to the field is a show. Then we do a show at halftime. Then we march back into the stands—getting into the stands is a show, going back to the band room is a show, getting inside the band room is a show. Everything we do is for everybody else to see" (Davis and Black).

As one of the largest and most visible student organizations on campus, marching bands are important and effective recruiting tools for HBCUs. Such processions to and from the field extend the band's performance space (and recruiting potential) beyond the football stadium and into the public sphere. Trombone player Jerry Davis describes his experience seeing the North Carolina A&T marching band for the first time during a pre-game procession:

We were walking down to the game and we heard this ... to me, it sounded like war. "Where was it coming from?" Being a band member, I knew it was a cadence. It sounded like they were right there, though. We just picked a corner and stood there for a full fifteen minutes before we got sight of the first person in the band. We thought, "Maybe they are across campus or something." Then, the first Drum Major turns the corner. I thought, "Oh my god" when I saw them. We followed them to the stadium and we watched them march in. My eyes just blew. I didn't expect to see them. I didn't come to see them, but when I did see them, I said, "That's it; I'm coming to A&T. I want to be a part of that." (Davis and Black)

Similarly, Quinton Lewis, a tuba player for A&T, relates his experience of first seeing the marching band when he was a sophomore in high school:

I came up here [to North Carolina A&T in Greensboro, North Carolina] on University Day. I was sitting in the gym and the band came in. I was like, "Oh, man! Oh, man!" I was just so excited



about it. I said to my mom and my daddy, "This is where I want to go to school." They were like, "Start preparing yourself then." So I started preparing myself for college—studying more, making better grades. (Brisbon and Lewis)

Band members are acutely aware of their visibility and their responsibility of recruiting for their school. "Even though we are out there to perform and entertain, we are also out there to promote our school and let kids in the stands think this might be the school I want to go to one day," says Dominic Stephens. "Or if they aren't sure that this is the school they want to go to, seeing us might finalize their decision to come here" (Stephens).

36 Competition is a ubiquitous force behind the vitality of many forms of African American music and dance. Jacqui Malone notes that "competitive interaction [is found] in the jam sessions of jazz musicians, cutting sessions of tap dancers, challenge matches of break dancers, colorful parades of black social aid and pleasure clubs, and the 'sing offs' of blues shouters of the twenties, gospel quartets of the thirties and forties, and doo wop vocalists of the fifties" (5). In New Orleans, local brass bands would often face-off in musical battles called "bucking contests." Music historian Eileen Southern describes one of these contests: "One band would literally play another off the streets by playing louder or more brilliantly or with sweeter tones, much to the delight of the hundreds of band watchers on the streets who would assemble at the first sounds of a ta-ta-ta-ta ta-ta from the trumpets calling the bandsmen together" (340). By engaging in "competitive interaction" on game day, marching bands of Historically Black Colleges and Universities are continuing a tradition that has helped maintain the vitality and distinction of numerous African American art forms throughout history (Malone 5).

As soon as both bands arrive into the football arena, the musical "battle" is on. During the first, second and fourth quarters of a football game, sections of the home band—the trumpets, trombones, French horns, drummers, tubas and sousaphones—take turns challenging the visiting band's sections by launching "punches" back-and-forth at one another across the field. "Punches" are short musical pieces that draw on American popular culture. You'll hear everything from television and movie themes—those from *What's Happening* and *Sanford and Son*

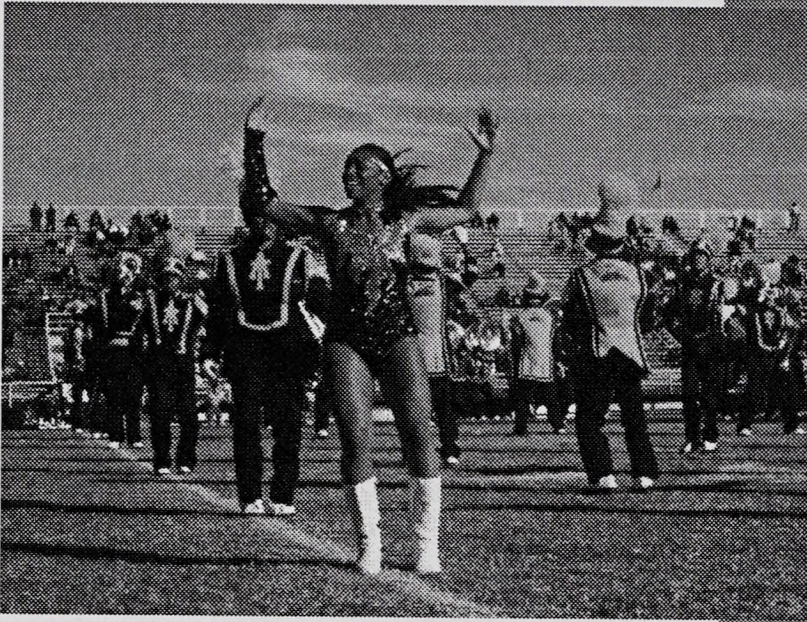


to *Superman* and *Star Wars*—to pieces inspired by sports news and events, like the Olympics, Wimbledon, and ESPN. The more creative and familiar the music is to the general audience, the more lethal the “punch.” Although “winning” a sectional battle is subjective, the overall goal is to throw the most “punches” (without repeating them) and to play them more articulately with better tone and meter than the opponent. Emphasis is on ingenuity as well as musicality, as sections choose and write arrangements for their “punching” repertoire.

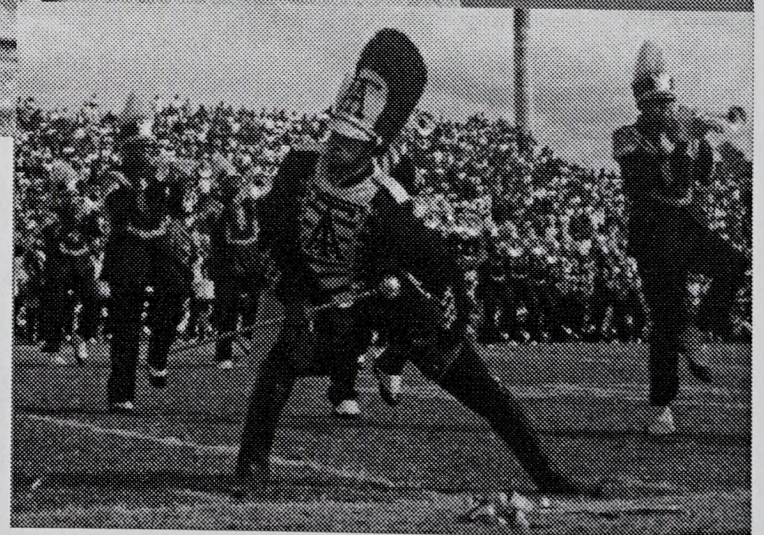
The persistence of this tradition of sectional battles is a current concern among the HBCU band community. In 2001, the athletic commissioner of the CIAA<sup>8</sup> mandated that the bands not play from the stands when the ball is in play, no matter whose team is on offense or defense. According to these rules, the bands are limited to playing during time-outs or after points scored.<sup>9</sup> Band members have expressed concern of the fate of the “punching” tradition if this ruling indeed is a growing trend among other HBCU athletic conferences. They feel these changes might compromise the competitive spirit that is vital to the dynamism of the game-day event.

Although each band’s section is left to determine the “winner” of sectional battles, the halftime field show is specifically designed to elicit the participation and reaction from the audience in order to make this determination. Thus, these halftime field shows are among the most highly anticipated events that occur on game day for both the bands and the spectators. These performances are marked by a high degree of pageantry, showmanship, and musicality. John Philip Sousa meets P. Diddy (Sean Combs) as the bands seamlessly blend traditional European marching tunes with contemporary hip-hop and R&B arrangements. In accordance with African aesthetics, music and dance are synonymous—one virtually an expression of the other. This rhythmic emphasis is realized in the HBCU field show choreography during what is known as “the freak”—a collage of hip-hop and rap tunes to which the entire band bumps, grinds, hops, kicks, nods, stomps, shouts, and moves their bodies in a dance breakdown. To insure that the material is fresh and current, committees of band members are allowed to choose the tunes and dances. The “freak,” an element unique to HBCU marching bands, is performed primarily to engage the crowd, creating an effervescent energy unrivaled in other (non-HBCU) marching band traditions.





*"[H]alftime field shows are among the most highly anticipated events that occur on game day for both the bands and the spectators. These performances are marked by a high degree of pageantry, showmanship, and musicality."*





Among the first to incorporate dance moves into the halftime field show performance was the former Director of Bands for Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University, Dr. William Patrick Foster (Malone 1990: 67–69). Foster is considered by many to be the progenitor of black college marching band showmanship. “Foster was the Drum Major of the HBCU bands,” says North Carolina A&T’s band director Dr. Johnny Hodge.

He basically put HBCU bands on the map. Before Foster, black marching band traditions were not known by the majority culture. Segregation kept people separated and one cultural group didn’t know what the other was doing. But when he took his ‘Marching 100’ to Miami’s Orange Bowl Stadium in 1963 and appeared on national television, he opened the eyes of America. (2001)

Many HBCU band members and directors consider Foster’s book, *Band Pageantry*, as the “bible” for black marching technique. In the preface, Foster explains that in order for band pageants to be truly significant experiences, they “should embody educational and cultural values which have meaning for the band members as well as for the spectators” (v).

Like Foster, all HBCU band directors are dedicated to creating meaningful performances for both the band and audience, which are most apparent in the halftime field show. According to HBCU band members, the goal of the halftime field show is “to win the most ‘house.’” “House” is a referential term meaning “loud, energized participation of the audience.” Embodied in this term is a profound commitment that HBCU bands have to, for their audience, keep their performances fresh, creative, engaging, and reflective of a shared sense of cultural values and aesthetics. Each Saturday is thus a negotiation—an open exchange of ideas. As the bands perform, they gauge the aspects of their performance that the audience responds to with the most enthusiasm. In turn, this information will influence the strategies for planning future performances. With the home band doing everything within its ability to keep the visiting band from “stealing its crowd,” these competitions are fierce and highly entertaining.

Jeffery Fuchs, the Director of Athletic Bands at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, agrees that HBCU bands have a unique



ability to engage their audience. Fuchs recalls watching band performances on Black Entertainment Television in the 1980s and early '90s: "I watched it every Saturday night and was amazed at how they [HBCU bands] could control their crowds and get them involved. I wish that our band at U. North Carolina could do that sometimes" (Fuchs).

Because the audiences at HBCUs expect new, creative and entertaining shows, the bands continually reinvent themselves, pushing the limits of showmanship while simultaneously trying to out-march, out-blow and out-dance the other band. And if that doesn't work, there's always theatrics, for example, when the "Marching Wildcats" of Daytona Beach's Bethune-Cookman College came to Greensboro to battle North Carolina A&T's "Blue and Gold Marching Machine" on their homecoming. Dr. Johnny Hodge, North Carolina A&T's Director of Bands, had arranged for his head drum major, Blu Thompson, to fake an illness at the beginning of halftime and be dramatically taken off the field in full view of the bands and the crowd. Bethune-Cookman played first. Towards the conclusion of their performance, the band found themselves in the shadow of a helicopter hovering overhead. Spectators watched in awe as the helicopter landed on the 50-yard line. Then the crowd went wild when Thompson leaped out, did a funky dance, and proceeded to lead his band's halftime performance (Thompson).

But the HBCU tradition is not just about dancing, pageantry and theatrics; it's about musicianship. "Any Saturday you can be blown away, colloquially speaking, and you have to be prepared," Hodge says. "It's basically war for 15 to 20 minutes during every football game, because the other band is going to try to be better than you are. It's just a matter of being the one who is the most prepared and the most focused" (Hodge 2001).

For North Carolina A&T, preparation involves practicing and conditioning five times a week during the fall semester, during which time band members are expected to learn up to 107 different musical pieces that make up "the book." Each band has its own book—its ammunition, so to speak. "The book" is a collection that includes published and unpublished musical arrangements, some of which are written by the band's staff. This collection ranges from technical marches, concert and show tunes, to contemporary soul, funk, hip-hop, and R&B arrangements. Band members are responsible for memorizing the book over the course of the season, and should be able,



when called upon, to recite any of its tunes without difficulty. Besides the obvious educational benefits, by memorizing and being proficient in scores of various musical arrangements, they are aptly prepared for another tradition commonly practiced among HBCUs—the “fifth quarter” competition.

Whereas the halftime performances are aimed at pleasing the crowd, the “fifth quarter” contest is primarily for the musicians. Immediately following the completion of the football game, fans filter down onto the field between the bands that remain facing across from each other in their respective stands. They then take turns playing full musical scores until one band gives in and leaves their stand. These competitions often last for hours. Reminiscent of the jazz band battles at Harlem’s Savoy Ballroom in the ’30s and ’40s, the “fifth quarter” competition allows both the bands and their directors to square off and see who can play louder, sweeter, and longer than the other. These contests unfold as collective improvisations as directors choose tunes that challenge the opposing band’s depth, technique, sound quality, and ingenuity. To “win” a fifth quarter competition, the band needs a diverse and expansive repertoire that can be played flawlessly with proper melody, intonation, and meter. For instance, a performance of Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition* by one band might prompt the other band to answer with an equally technical piece—an overture or march. If one band plays a unique arrangement of a Petey Pablo’s *Raise Up*, the other band might be tempted to demonstrate its ingenuity by playing back its own arrangement of a popular hip-hop tune. During a single fifth quarter competition, one might hear a march by Edwin Goldman, a jazz composition by John Williams, an overture by Giuseppe Verdi, a soul classic by James Brown, a R&B tune by Janet Jackson, and a hip-hop song by Master P. The HBCU tradition, by emphasizing a mastery of musical genres from classical to contemporary, celebrates the diversity of musical traditions that influence American identities—with or without hyphenation.

Part of the fun is the taunts and gesturing used to spice up the competitions. Howard University’s entire band once pulled out newspapers and acted as if they were reading them while North Carolina A&T played a song during a fifth quarter competition. North Carolina A&T band members once laid down their instruments, slumped over on their neighbors, and pretended to sleep while their rival band played. It is all part of the spirit of competition, the spirit that drives the HBCU bands to excellence.



Before, during, and after the game, whether or not the football players are on the field, the stadium is inundated with the sounds of wind and percussion instruments playing tunes in a manner aimed at both pleasing and engaging the audience. "I guess that music is a vital part of our [African American] existence," says Forrester about why the band is so valued among HBCUs. "Music always has been and probably always will be. I think that it's just part of our fiber" (Forrester). Forrester explicitly states that the band's popularity among HBCUs is primarily cultural.

Once understood within their cultural and historical contexts, these marching band performances on the campuses of Historically Black Colleges and Universities may be recognized as significant and influential sites of cultural production. Through their musical repertoire (both the mastery of multiple genres and its interconnectedness with dance), attitudes towards time and space, and penchant for pageantry, dance, competition, improvisation, sampling, polyrhythms, and a conversational dynamic, HBCU marching band performances embody aesthetics that transcend band membership and embrace values belonging to a continuous cycle of African American cultural expressivity.

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### *Acknowledgements*

This article would not have been possible without the cooperation and collaboration of North Carolina A&T State University's band director Dr. Johnny Hodge, his assistant, Ellard Forrester; other staff; and numerous members of the "Blue and Gold Marching Machine"—Dominic Stephens, Jerry Davis, Derrick Black, Bluford Thompson, Deana Marshall, Brannon Bynum, Joy Campbell, Quinton Lewis, and Chris Goins. Now part of my on-going research for my master's thesis, this project began as a group project for a class at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in the fall of 1999 that involved five other participants, including my colleagues Ashley Nation and David Potorti—both of whom have contributed interview materials from which several quotes were gleaned. I would also like to thank the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Director of Athletic Bands, Jeffery Fuchs, for his contributions.



*Notes*

<sup>1</sup> Reported in an article by Thyrie Bland entitled "High schools, colleges face of in booming musical showdown" in the Clarion-Ledger on-line newspaper ([www.clarionledger.com](http://www.clarionledger.com)), September 30, 2002. Among the bands in attendance were Mississippi Valley State University's "Mean Green Marching Machine," Florida A&M University's "Marching 100," and Jackson State University's "Sonic Boon of the South." Popular among HBCUs, "Battle of the Bands" are admission events held on Sundays throughout the fall marching season that allow bands to compete against one another without the "distractions" of the football game. These events feature field shows by each band and several rounds of musical numbers played from the stands.

<sup>2</sup> Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, had opened its doors in 1866 as an all-black educational institution. In 1871, Fisk's music instructor, George L. White, conceived the idea of touring a chorus of talented singers in order to raise money to help build a music program, which was financially strained in its early years. After performing at Patrick S. Gilmore's World Peace Jubilee on June 29, 1872, in Boston, the Singers gained widespread fame and staged national and international tours (Southern 225-227).

<sup>3</sup> According to William Schafer, "Funerals were the ultimate ceremony, summarizing the impulse toward social-clubbing, fraternity, celebration, and ritual in the community. Benevolent or burial associations that New Orleans blacks joined offered burial insurance, as well as other forms of assistance and social coherence. But their final obligation was to sponsor a decent, decorous burial for their dues-paying members. Part of this burial contract included, at the request of the member and his family, music for the funeral, which might mean a band for the funeral cortege .... The band headed the procession—preceding the hearse, mourners, and members of the association—to add a solemn, splendid weight to the cortege. The band was engaged to provide appropriate music—hymns and dirges—for the procession, to play outside the church or home where the funeral sermon was preached, to accompany the corpse to the graveyard, and to provide hymns or spirituals at the graveside in the ceremony conducted by the deceased [person's] church .... The musical funeral complemented the attitude



toward death in the black community—rounding out a ceremonial farewell, a celebration of life as much as a recognition of the triumph of death” (Schafer 66–67).

<sup>4</sup> In 1862, during the Civil War, Congress passed the first Land Grant Act (Morrill Act). This act provided each state 30,000 acres of federal lands that could be sold in order to finance schools to teach primarily agriculture and mechanical arts. However, the majority of historically black colleges were founded after the Civil War. The passage of the second Land Grant Act in 1890 specifically stated that funds for higher education be granted on a just and equitable basis. Consequently, between 1880 and 1899, seventeen black land-grant colleges were established in Southern and border states and emphasized agricultural, mechanical and industrial education. These colleges include: University of Maryland–Eastern Shore; Alabama A&M University; the University of Arkansas, Pine Bluffs; Delaware State College; Florida A&M University, North Carolina A&T State University; Fort Valley State College; Kentucky State University; Southern University, Baton Rouge; Alcorn State University; South Carolina State University; Tennessee State University; Prairie View A&M University; Virginia State University; West Virginia State College; Lincoln University, and Langston University (LaVeist).

<sup>5</sup> There are interminable debates among American collegiate band scholars about what school’s band program was founded when; however, Al G. Wright and Stanley Newcomb consider some of the earliest and most established collegiate band programs to be: University of Michigan (1844), Michigan State university (1870), University of Illinois (1872), Ohio State University (1878), University of Iowa (1881), Purdue University (1886), University of Wisconsin (1886), University of Minnesota (1890), Indiana University (1896), Florida A&M University (1892), and Yale University (1918); (Wright and Newcomb 87-102).

<sup>6</sup> Corps style marching is a European military drill exercise that emphasizes control and angularity. The upper body is kept erect and movement is restricted. According to Robert Foster, author of *Multiple-Option Marching Band Techniques*, the first marching band to deviate from the standard military block formation was the University of Illinois



band, which formed letters, words, and intricate patterns on the field while playing in 1905. The band director, Albert Austin Harding is recognized as “a pioneer in the movement which has made the appearance of bands an important part of the fall football spectacles” (Foster 20).

<sup>7</sup> Listed in a Tuskegee Band concert program dated January 29, 1925, were the names of individuals who had successfully completed the music program at Tuskegee and had gone on to teach at other institutions. The names of these individuals, their affiliate institution, and the date they began, included: A. W. Lee, A & M College (later called Florida A&M University) in Tallahassee, Florida (1916); William Carey Thomas, Pullman Band in Chicago, Illinois (1917); Leonard Bowden, Alabama Reform School in Mt. Meigs, Alabama (1922); Daniel Andrews, City Band in Winston-Salem, North Carolina (1922); N. A. Hall, State Normal School in Montgomery, Alabama (1922); Fred B. Peyton, State College in Orangeburg, South Carolina (1923); William Washington, State Normal Training and Industrial School, in Sand Springs, Oklahoma (1913); Lewis Gray, Prairie View A&M University (1923) (Smith 81).

<sup>8</sup> Historically Black Colleges and Universities are divided into four athletic conferences: the CIAA (Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association), MEAC (Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference), SWAC (Southwestern Athletic Conference), and SIAC (Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Conference).

<sup>9</sup> The CIAA athletic commissioner’s decision is based upon the rules set by the NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association), which the majority of member schools observe. However, although HBCU athletic conferences are also members of the NCAA, until recently the athletic commissions have not enforced any restrictions upon the bands, allowing them to play at their own discretion.



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fig. 1



fig. 2

*"Christmas yard displays are a traditional art ...and employ a common language made up of the secular and sacred symbols."*

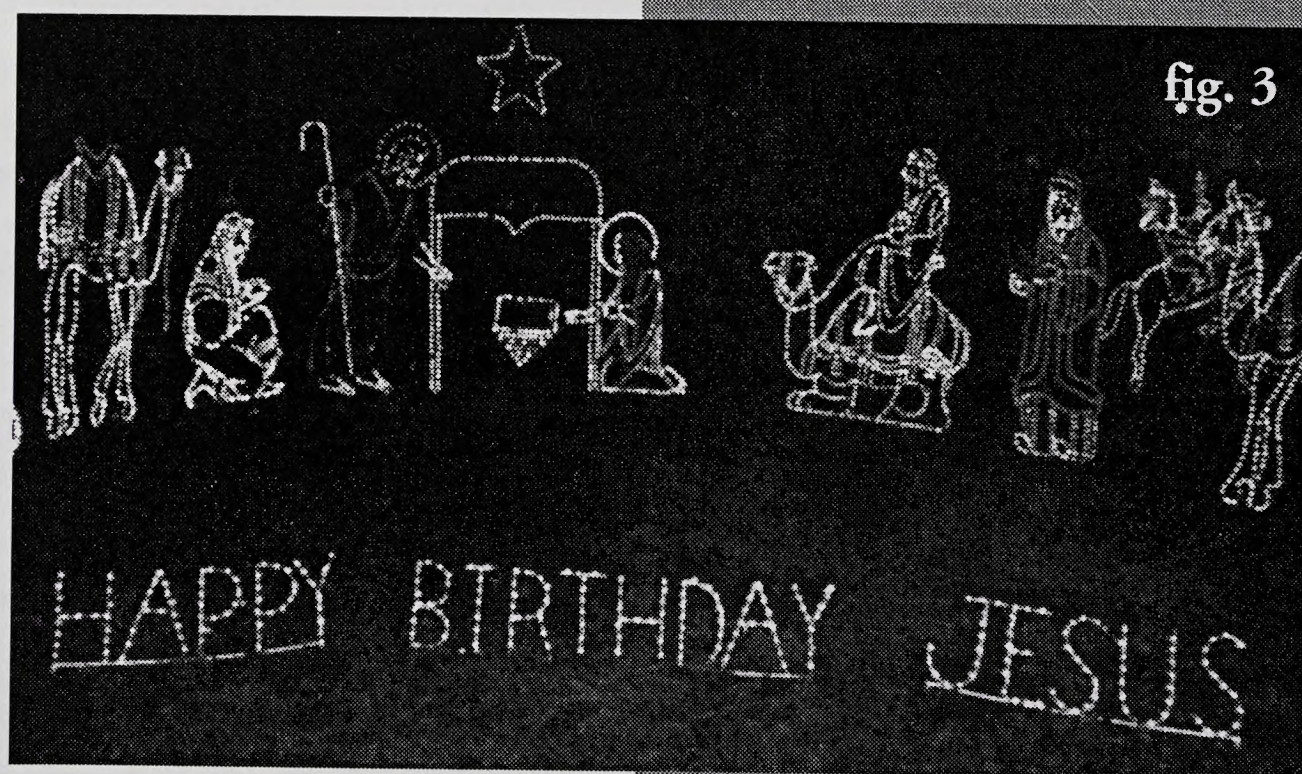


fig. 3

*All photos by Stephen and Samantha Criswell.*



## Jesus, Mary, and Frosty: Grady and Katie Costner and the Art of Christmas Yard Displays

~ Stephen Criswell and Samantha McCluney Criswell

The scene is replayed every year at Christmastime on TV or in the movies: A middle-class suburban neighborhood during the holiday season, and whether it is Homer Simpson, Chevy Chase's Clark Griswold, or another hapless but well-meaning rube filled with the Christmas spirit and holiday hubris, the patriarch of the suburban family seeks to out-do his neighbors with a display of Christmas lights, figurines, and assorted decorations that perfectly captures the meaning of Christmas and might possibly be visible from space. Invariably, this attempt to create the perfect holiday display ends in fire, electrocution, or some other tragic but humorous consequence. While exaggerated for comic effect, this well-worn scene depicts a holiday tradition common to countless Americans. The creation, assemblage, and display of Christmas yard decorations for many Americans mark the beginning of the holiday season. For some, this event involves simply stringing lights on outdoor evergreens, hanging a wreath on the front door, and opening the curtains so that the indoor decorations might be visible from the street. For others, it is a complicated process of assembling from a body of symbols those icons that best express the meaning of the holiday and creating, often by hand, a unique expression of what Jack Santino calls, the "ways we think about and ways we feel about the season and its holiday" ("Folk Assemblage" 153).

In *Christmas in America: A History*, Penne Restad traces the origins of Christmas trees in America to the Pennsylvania Dutch who, in the early nineteenth century, brought to their New World home their German custom of decorating evergreens with sweets, nuts, ribbons, gilded paper, and figurines (58-59). Their tradition was at least as old as the Protestant Reformation in Europe [early to mid-sixteenth century] and, in the United States, the Christmas tree quickly became the "visual magnet for the holiday season" (Restad 64). The use of candles to decorate



the trees, another German custom, became popular in the US by the mid-nineteenth century (Restad 65) and, as Restad further explains, "As tree ornamentation changed to reflect international trade, American taste, and modern invention, the illumination of the tree advanced from a few wax candles to a fine art" (113). During the last few decades of the 1800s, decorations on the average Christmas tree increased in quantity and quality, despite the obvious dangers of attaching numerous candles to a drying tree. Moreover, middle- and upper-class households began to create "elaborate landscapes beneath [their] Christmas trees.... Some went so far as to transform their front rooms into bowers...[The] trees ceased to be solely objects of private delight. Many of their creators constructed them for public display albeit in a private setting" (Restad 115). Passersby were often invited into homes to view family holiday displays, which might include a steamship traveling down a tinsel river beneath a well-illuminated Christmas tree or a decorated tree set in a forest scene complete with "stuffed squirrels, raccoons, and opossums" (116). Still the displays were confined to the front or living room.

50 | It is unclear exactly when the front yard became a site for holiday displays, but several events point to the early 1900s as the starting date for holiday yard displays. By the first decade of the twentieth century, storeowners began to raise "Christmas-dressed store windows to an art form that enchanted thousands" and moved Christmas decorations to street-level display windows (128). Around the same time, community decorations and Christmas trees in town squares became popular so that the outdoor environment became an acceptable site for holiday decorations. But in terms of yard art, the most significant development was the advent of the contemporary front yard. Fred Schroeder has argued that the modern front yard is a relatively recent phenomenon. Originally part of the living space of the American home, the front yard was transformed by the backyard and the front porch into a "symbolic space" (Schroeder 37), a display area between the private living space and the public world. As the backyard assumed the role of outdoor living space and work area, and the front porch became the barrier between the home and the street, the front yard became a site for "public ornament" (Schroeder 36). Front yards, as Schroeder explains, "turned outward for the pleasure of the passing parade" (107). Homeowners



soon began cultivating and decorating their yards—maintaining them to adhere to community standards, but often decorating them with objects to express personal identity and taste. Pink flamingoes are the obvious example of such yard decorations, but statues of the Virgin Mary and other saints, bird baths, miniature fountains, and a host of other mass-produced as well as handmade yard ornaments dot the modern front yard. And at some point in the recent past, the growing popularity of yard decorations merged with the increasingly public display of Christmas iconography to create the contemporary phenomenon of Christmas yard art.

Christmas yard art ranges from the sublime to the ridiculous, and often includes both. Yard decorations are extremely common in the suburbs and rural areas during the month or so before Christmas. Discount and home supply warehouse stores offer “Santa Stop Here” signs, enormous Styrofoam candy canes, plastic light-up figures of Santa, Frosty the Snowman, and the baby Jesus. Many homeowners place a few of these store-bought mass-produced items around their front yards, seemingly suggesting to their communities and to passersby that they are in the spirit of the season. Others use these items and even create their own to construct elaborate works of folk art. As Jack Santino describes in his study of the similar phenomenon of Halloween displays, “The front of the house becomes the ‘canvas,’ as it were, of a three-dimensional work of art” (“Folk Assemblage” 158). Santino continues, explaining that the decorations are an integral part of the holiday season; he says, “...the decorations frame that time and define it symbolically. In this way, people display their sense of when a holiday season begins and ends... [T]he placement of those decorations, in some cases the making of them, helps to create a feeling appropriate to the holiday season, to put one in the ‘mood’ or ‘spirit’ of the holiday” (153). Unlike Halloween, which for most Americans lacks religious significance, Christmas and its “spirit” involves a blending of religious, secular, and commercial values. The art of the yard displays reflects this multifaceted nature of the holiday.

Most elaborate yard displays include both secular and sacred icons of the Christmas season. In fig. 1 (see above, p. 42), an image of a Christmas gift lies in the foreground, with a nativity scene further back, and an outline of a snowman can be seen in the background. The display



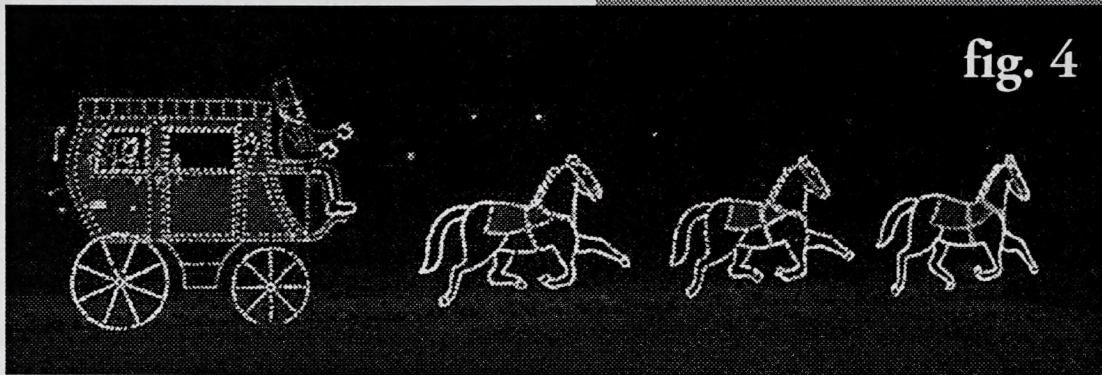


fig. 4



fig. 5

*"The goal of the Costners' display is clearly to express their own and their community's visions of the holiday season, while at the same time fulfilling an aesthetic requirement to gain the adulation of neighbors and a sense of personal satisfaction".*



fig. 6



artist here has combined handmade images with store-bought figurines. The personal expression and the artistry can be seen in the way the homeowner has arranged the objects. As Santino explains, "In the cases where we see mass-produced items, they are usually used as part of a larger, tasteful, holistic assemblage. They are cut up and recombined according to a particular aesthetic and personal vision" ("Folk Assemblage" 163). All of the items in the fig. 1 display are stereotypical images of the Christmas holidays. Commercial, spiritual, and environmental associations are combined. Santino terms such displays *assemblages*, "a term which refers to a category of art, a genre of sculpture done with found objects, a kind of three dimensional collage...combining...a variety of symbolic elements within a single frame" resulting in "the creation of a single aesthetic entity by grouping together disparate things" ("Folk Assemblage" 158-159). In this case, seemingly disparate things—Frosty, the baby Jesus, and presents—are joined together. While the ideas that the images suggest seem incongruent, the commercialism embodied in the popular culture figure Frosty, the sacred figure of the baby Jesus, and the presents, which might represent both the gifts of the magi and modern consumerism, altogether embody the contemporary concept of Christmas for most Americans.

Combinations of nativity scenes with secular popular culture figures such as Santa, Frosty the Snowman, and Disney characters, as well as traditional images such as candy canes, wreaths, and poinsettias, are typical of many yard displays. Christmas yard art is very often an imitative art. As Schroeder explains, most yard decorations find their origin in imitation. On a Sunday drive a homeowner might see a yard he or she admires and will soon set about to imitate it. Schroeder asserts that imitation "may be the predominant mode of cultural change and exchange" (97). As Bob Deluca of Lafayette, Louisiana, explained, "I just like to ride around...to look at the different decorations people put in their yard and I just decided to put some in my yard. I just got carried away and now I have to use three yards for all of my decorations." Imitation is a viable way to maintain a tradition. Christmas yard displays are a traditional art with shared motifs that include what is displayed and how, and employ a common language made up of the secular and sacred symbols associated with Christmas. These symbols express shared notions about Christmas and its meaning; however, specific individual



tastes and values often also come into play—values of the individual display artist, his or her family, and the surrounding community.

Some display artists prefer to focus more on the secular aspects of Christmas—as one informant told us in regard to her Dr. Seuss-based display, “Of course, Jesus is the reason, but the Grinch who stole Christmas inspired it to take place.” Other Christmas yard artists, particularly in the rural South, prefer to stress the religious significance of the holiday, often to the extent that the display becomes a testimony or sermon (see fig. 2, p. 48). Like the holiday pageants of the Middle Ages that reminded Christmas celebrants of Christ’s fate and their own eventual judgment, this display incorporates imagery more often associated with Easter, the finale of the Christmas story. The Calvary crosses decked out with Christmas lights literally tie the holidays of Christmas and Easter together in a powerful expression of the meaning of Christmas for this display artist. Note that Frosty makes a background appearance here as well.

54 | Contrary to the stereotypes presented in television sitcoms and holiday movies, homeowners who decorate their yards with lights, figurines, and handmade objects are not always the aforementioned “hapless rubes” determined to outdo or (literally) outshine their neighbors. There is often a message and a method behind their displays, and to some degree or another there is artistry. Santino has noted in regard to similar yard displays:

An assemblage has its own meaning and its own aesthetic...there may be a tendency to see the folk assemblage as frivolous, or worse, trivial. Fun to make they may be, delightful and entertaining to look at, certainly, but that by no means contradicts their import of consequence, nor denies the weight of message. (“Folk Assemblage” 167)

Epitomizing the best of Christmas yard displays are the creations of Jasper “Grady” Costner and his wife Katie. Known as “The Christmas Man,” in his hometown of Kings Mountain, North Carolina, septuagenarian Grady Costner is a retired floor-covering installer who late in life found his artistic calling. Together, he and his wife have created dozens of intricately detailed light statues using only 5/16th inch steel



rods, a welder, and thousands upon thousands of colored lights. Starting several years ago with a few reindeer, and moving on to Santas and cartoon characters, the Costners now display in their small yard such creations as a full-size carousel, a life-size Moses next to an eerily lit burning bush, a battalion of toy soldiers, an illuminated Bible, and a menagerie of animals; their gallery includes every conceivable sacred and secular image associated with Christmas, as well as several pieces whose only association with Christmas are the lights that illuminate them (see fig. 3-6).

Throughout the holiday season, residents of Kings Mountain and the neighboring towns of Shelby and Gastonia, as well as other travelers heading northward to the “Christmastown” of McAdenville, North Carolina, or toward Charlotte for Christmas shopping, drive or walk through the Costners’ yard to marvel at the wonder of their creations and to rekindle their own Christmas spirit.

The Costners, in the origins of their art, their motivation, and their aesthetics, share much in common with other documented yard-display artists. Like yard artist Clyde Jones, documented in Kathleen Condon’s essay in the collection *Arts in Earnest*, who began his yard display by copying three commercially manufactured deer, Grady and Katie Costner first decorated their yard with commercially available reindeer light frames. Mr. Costner, dissatisfied with the price and quality of the light frame, decided to make his own. Enlisting his wife’s help with stringing the lights, the two found that their skills and aesthetic sense perfectly complemented each other.

Like most other self-taught artists, Grady Costner realized his talent later in life as a way of dealing with the free time afforded him by retirement. Condon has noted that a common motivation exists among this particular community of artists, the “desire to occupy spare time with the process of trying to make things.” In her study of Clyde Jones, Condon notes that Jones took up chain saw art as a way to pass the time while recuperating from a work injury (181). Likewise, Grady Costner, through his and his wife’s creations, found an activity to occupy his time and make use of his technical skills as well as an occupation that serves as outlet for his creativity. Listening to Grady and Katie explain their creations reveals artistic minds at work. Grady talks of solving





fig. 7

*The Costners find the inspiration for their creations in a variety of places—from traditional Christmas images, such as snowmen (left), to current events (as above) where Santa pilots what appears to be a military helicopter.*

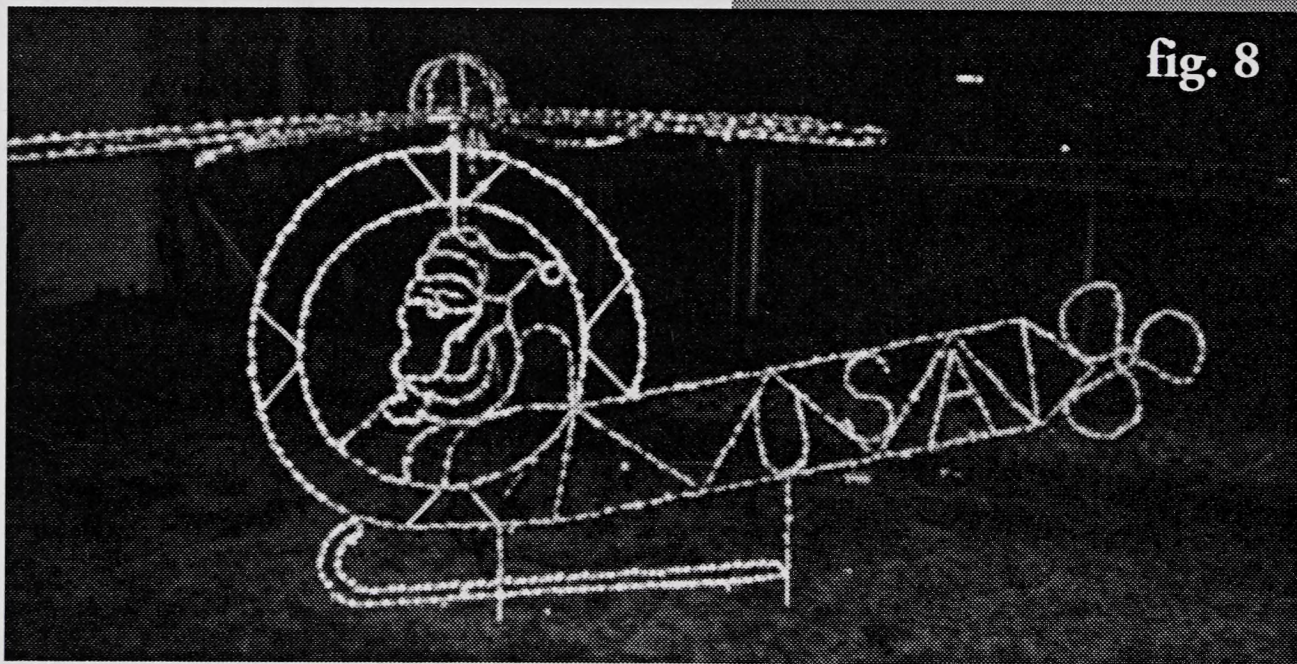


fig. 8



design problems in his sleep, dreaming about solutions to problems with frame structures. Likewise, his wife often waits for inspiration before beginning her task of attaching the lights. She told us:

I never done anything [artistic] until we started messing with [these lights].... That first piece we bought, the lights was taped on and I looked at it and thought, "I can do that." And I would start putting my lights on and then I'd work myself in a corner. You know, when you start with those lights you have to sit down, you got to look at that thing and you got to figure how to go and come back out because, if you go up to a dead end there and you got to cross over, if you don't watch what you're doing you gonna have to take them off. I just sit and look at it and decide which way I'm gonna go. I'll sit here and look at it and figure it out, and get it in my mind what colors I want to get. I'll sit and look at it, and then I'll watch TV and I'll maybe glance back over there and look at it, and then I'll figure out what colors I'm gonna use, and then I'll just go get my lights and start.

The Costners find the inspiration for their creations in a variety of places—from traditional Christmas images, such as snowmen (fig. 7, p. 56), to current events, as suggested in fig. 8 (p. 56), where Santa pilots what appears to be a military helicopter. Other pieces find their origins in the mundane, such as the peacock in fig. 9 (p. 59), drawn from an illustration on a bag of Peacock Potatoes.

When we asked Mr. Costner about his work, whether it was an outlet for religious zeal or artistic creativity, his answer was simple and to-the-point: "We started out just like everybody else does—with a window and a tree." But unlike everybody else, their "window and a tree" has evolved into a display covering their home and property. The goal of the Costners' display is clearly to express their own and their community's visions of the holiday season, while at the same time fulfilling an aesthetic requirement to gain the adulation of neighbors and a sense of personal satisfaction. As Mr. Costner explains: "You make a nice piece and put it out in your yard, somebody comes by and brags on it and everything, it makes you feel good. I don't care who you are. If you've done it with your own hands it makes you feel good." The



importance of the Costners' displays to the community is acknowledged by their neighbors, as Grady Costner notes, "Every time [I] go to the grocery store, somebody says, 'Well there's Santy Claus!' 'There's Christmas Man!'" Moreover, their works seem to fulfill a community need, as the Costners explain, "The people expect us to do it. We couldn't quit now. If we get where we can't do it—I don't know what we're gonna do, 'cause the people expect it." And in more recent years, the Costners' neighborhood has exhibited a feature common in neighborhoods that are known for their yard displays, a phenomenon that, for the purposes of this research, we have labeled "spillage," wherein the display of a single yard artist seems to spill over into adjacent yards as neighbors either imitate the original display, offer their yard space as a new canvas for the display artist, or both.<sup>1</sup> Clearly the Costners' neighbors, both those next door and around the region, value and support their efforts.

58 | Jack Santino addresses the role of "the people," the community, in displays such as the Costners'. Communities, he believes, are no longer stable and "filled with people who are tied together through kinship and friendship;" instead, he describes them as "mobile" and "characterized by apartment complexes where people often do not know their neighbors very well, if at all, and by neighborhoods with rapid rates of turnover" (*All Around the Year* 40). Nevertheless, community traditions still thrive through such phenomena as holiday yard displays and other such "public statements of private ritual." Santino argues that

The holiday decorations, the assemblages...are statements to an audience that shares the same language and participates in the same social events.... [T]hese decorations are a kind of communication, and the communication is expressive, artistic, rich in meaning, and traditional in origin. (40)

Katie Costner expresses a similar explanation for their work: "What we try to do is have things for the kids—the kids is the main thing. If you get the kids happy, you got it. But no, we don't do this just for our grandchildren, we just do it for kids in general." The Costners' displays communicate to their audience—their neighbors, visitors, and particularly the children—the importance of maintaining community values,



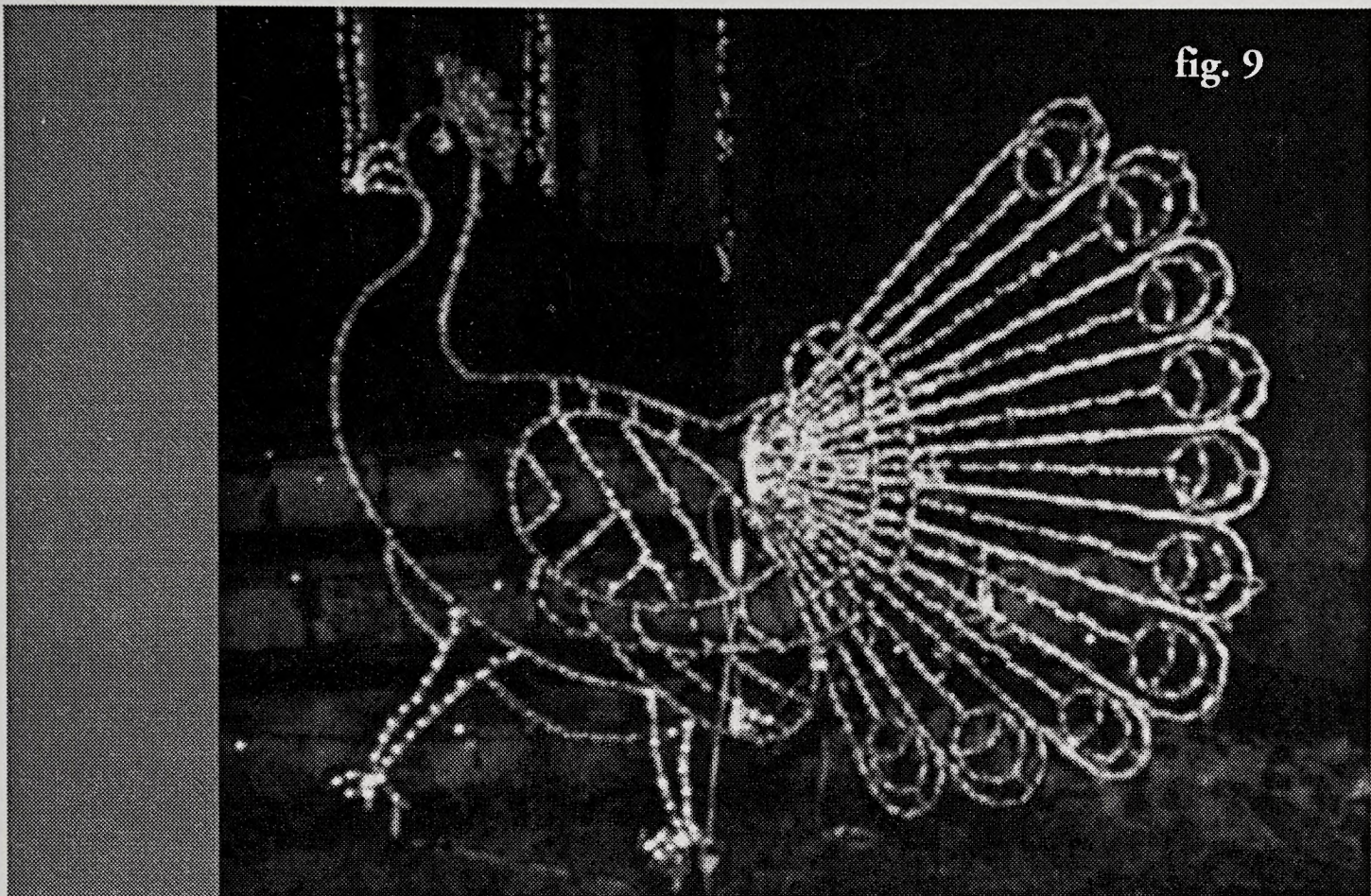


fig. 9

*"[Some] pieces find their origins in the mundane, such as the peacock drawn from an illustration on a bag of Peacock Potatoes."*

particularly those surrounding the Christmas holiday season. In this respect, the Costners exemplify the definition of folk artist proposed by John Micheal Vlach, by creating art that "exists in communities and is expressive of collectively held values which direct and focus an individual artist's creativity" (qtd. in Condon 179). Without the community to enjoy and respond to their creations, the Costners would probably not have devoted so much of their time, money, and yard space to these displays. Unlike many environmental artists documented and celebrated by art critics, folklorists, and other academics, who, as Crease and Mann describe, "worked tenaciously for years to transform their personal visions into habitable worlds in the confines of their yards," (qtd. in Condon 183), the Costners' vision is not personal, but reciprocal. They began by creating decorations for the enjoyment of their neighbors and family, who in turn suggested other objects the couple might create, which led to more creations and more suggestions—all motivated by a shared desire to enhance the holiday experience for their community.

Many scholars agree with Elinor Horwitz, who believes that yard artists are "people for whom a very private vision becomes an obsession"



(qtd. in Condon 183). And while this may be the case for some, or even many, this is not so for the Costners. Their vision is a very public one, shaped by their relationship with their community and its attitudes and aesthetics surrounding the Christmas holiday. Whereas artists labeled as “folk artists” may exist beyond or outside the realm of community values, the true folk artist embraces these values. For the Costners this means fashioning from steel rods and colored lights material manifestations of the sacred and secular joys of the holidays. For a growing number of families in the Cleveland and Gaston Counties of North Carolina, Christmas just isn’t Christmas without at least one visit to the Costners’ home. The simple beauty of their creations lights up the cold winter night and helps stir up in their neighbors the joy that one always hopes to find during the holidays

60 In an unapologetic blending of commercial and religious images, a blending of the sacred and the profane, displays such as those created by the Costners express the meaning of Christmas for many Americans. Restad notes that, “even as the materialistic features of [Christmas] have flourished, its spiritual dimension has broadened” (155). Despite public railings against the materialism of Christmas and the loss of the “true meaning” of the holiday by everyone from the local minister to Charles Schultz’s Charlie Brown, these yard-display artists and the communities that embrace them appear to have no problem reconciling the multiple aspects of Christmas. Mary and Frosty, the wise men and Santa, the humble Child and the garish blinking lights, the holy and the ornamental, spirituality and materialism are combined into a whole image of a holiday that is, after all, a celebration of the story of the sacred word becoming flesh and bone.

### Note

<sup>1</sup> This phenomenon can often be seen in the neighborhoods of other traditional artists and craftspeople. The yards adjacent to those of topiary artist Pearl Fryer in Bishopville, South Carolina, are populated with his creations. Likewise, the windmills of the late Lester Gay of Pitt County, North Carolina, are displayed in the yards and business lots of family members and neighbors [See Baldwin, Karen. “Lester Gay: Decorative Windmill Maker.” *North Carolina Folklore Journal*. 45.2 (1998) 95-102.].



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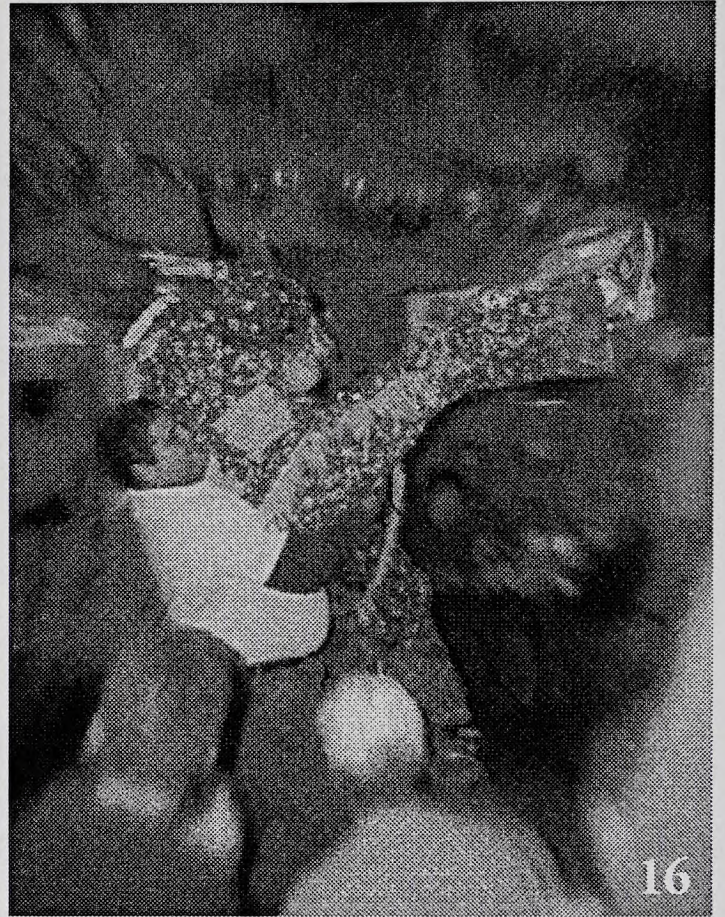
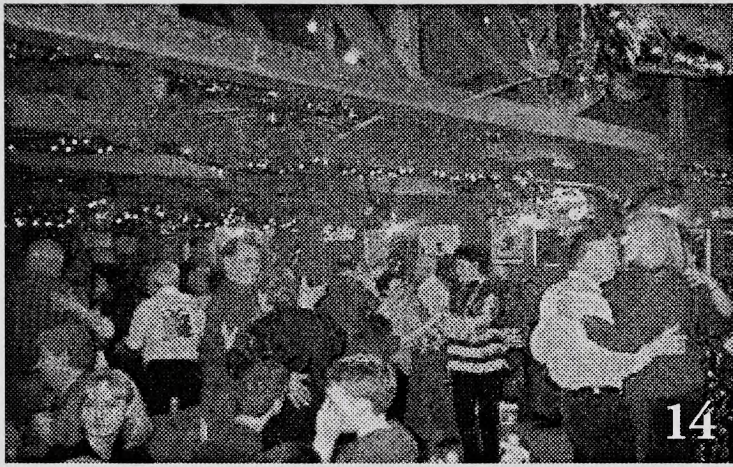
2003  
Mardi Gras





Prairie Region  
Louisiana





1. Woman Mardis Gras in tapestry and appliqué mask.
2. *Petit* Mardis Gras and mom.
3. Unmasked Basile reveler calling other Mardis Gras with animal horn.
4. Church Point *courir de Mardis Gras* on horseback.
5. Co-*capitaines* dragging uncooperative Mardis Gras back to transport wagon.
6. Basile Mardis Gras troupe awaiting departure.
7. Mardis Gras toddler at D.I.'s Cajun Food & Music.
8. Folklorist Carolyn Ware dances with Tee Mamou woman Mardis Gras.
9. *Trois* LeJeune Cove Mardis Gras and capitaine at their *bal masqué*, American Legion Hall, Iota.
10. Tee Mamou/Iota male Mardis Gras at D.I.'s costumed as *négresse*.
11. Mardi Gras patterned costume detail.
12. D.I.'s Cajun Food & Music.
13. Ernie Marshall dances with Mardi Gras during Tee Mamou women's *courir*.
14. D.I.'s dance floor before the arrival of the Mardi Gras.
15. Mardi Gras troupe enters D.I.'s, heading for the dance floor.
16. Time to leave and a Mardi Gras needs special handling by a capitaine.

Photos: Karen Baldwin and Ernie Marshall

Photoediting: Alzo David-West

Proofreading: Cheryl Dudasik-Wiggs

NB: French language spellings here are italicized in first instance and not italicized thereafter. Phrases in French are italicized throughout. In Cajun Louisiana, French and English coexist without distinguishing either as a "foreign" language.



## Cultural Tourists at Mardi Gras ~ On the Cajun Prairie in Louisiana and “Downeast” in Carolina

~ Karen Baldwin

D.I.'s Cajun Food and Music is the only building visible in a wide surround of rice fields and crawfish ponds in this part of the southern Louisiana prairie region.<sup>1</sup> Friday night before Mardi Gras 2003, D.I.'s was packed with merriment, music, and the excited anticipation of the arrival of *the* Mardi Gras, a masquerade troupe from two communities local to D.I.'s eatery and dance hall.<sup>2</sup> All the seating was taken; and we waited in close quarters with another forty or more folks, backed up against the cashier's booth and the glass-fronted case displaying souvenir mugs and tee shirts. Well, no. Not quite everyone was excited with anticipation. A couple from Ville Platte, just down the road, were disgruntled to discover that the crush of people and the more than an hour's wait for a table were accountable to the anticipated Mardi Gras. A Christian RV camper couple from Mississippi had no idea why the place was so crowded. Once they knew, they left. Perhaps a few others had come only to eat crawfish dishes and gumbo, drink sweet tea and beer, dance Cajun two-step and waltzes to live band music and the “high lonesome” sound of love lyrics sung in Cajun French. Ernie Marshall and I, folklorist Carolyn Ware, Mardi Gras participant and mask maker Kim Moreau, and most everyone else were there that particular Friday to welcome and enjoy the Mardi Gras performance.<sup>3</sup>

My cue for the imminent arrival of the troupe came in the form of a tall, powerfully built man wearing a Stetson, boots, plaid shirt, and jeans who wormed through the waiting crowd and down into the tables area in front of me. He carried a whip fashioned from burlap into a thick braid, coiled and held in one hand behind his back; he was a co-capitaine, one of those who “managed” the Mardi Gras' antics. Quickly I looked from the whip to the entrance door where costumed heads and black face guisers pressed up close on the outside, partially visible through the door's glass panel.



"Ernie!" I hoarse-whispered to get his attention and pointed. "See the guy with the whip? He's one of the *capitaines*. Look at the door! Here comes the Mardi Gras!"

The dance floor cleared; the band struck up the Mardi Gras entrance music; and in came thirty or so masqueraders, inside elbows linked two by two, bent forward at the waist, rhythmically stomping and singing. Two men in black face led the troupe, the larger man padded and dressed as an ample-bodied woman wearing a flowing tent of a dress and a tiny straw skimmer hat.<sup>4</sup> The rest of the troupe wore two-piece pajama-style outfits sewn from riotously colorful, highly patterned fabrics, fringed along every seam and around every opening. Each also wore a *capuchon*, a tall, cone-shaped hat, and a marvelously idiosyncratic homemade mask.

66 I was spellbound. My first encounter with the Mardi Gras of rural Cajun Louisiana was a powerful experience. The pulsing music and movement reverberated inside the crowded, noisy restaurant and dance hall.<sup>5</sup> The parade of costumed figures resonated the Philadelphia Mummers' parades of my youth; the west African masquerades I had seen in films and read about; the African American stepping cadres familiar from my Philadelphia past and my East Carolina University present; the Acadian step and country dance sets Ernie and I joined in Cape Breton and New Brunswick, Canada; and finally, the historical Jonkannu troupes and the "old" Christmas serenaders, ritual animal disguise figures, transvestite and black face guisers, traditional in a few places in coastal North Carolina.

Indeed, I was captivated, thrilled by yet another extraordinary performance tradition in the celebratory lives of "ordinary" people. Having the opportunity to visit Louisiana at Mardi Gras was a happy coincidence of East Carolina's spring break and the ancient calendar that moves this pre-Lenten festivity within prescribed configurations of earth, sun, and moon. Taking the opportunity was both a professional and personal pilgrimage. Between D.I.'s on Friday and the "fat" Tuesday of Mardi Gras, we managed to follow parts of four *courirs*—the Tee Mamou Women's Run, the Church Point *courir de Mardi Gras*, the Tee Mamou/Iota Children's Run (*Les Tout Petit Tee Mamou*), and the Basile *courir*. We also attended the Saturday night *bal* of the newly rejuvenated *courir* from LeJeune Cove at which the Mardi Gras troupe performed its begging ritual and antics.



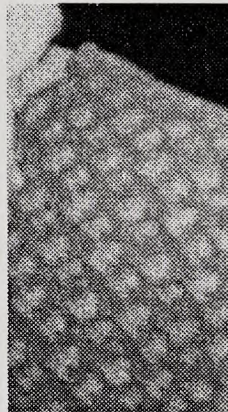


Mardi Gras at D.I.'s.

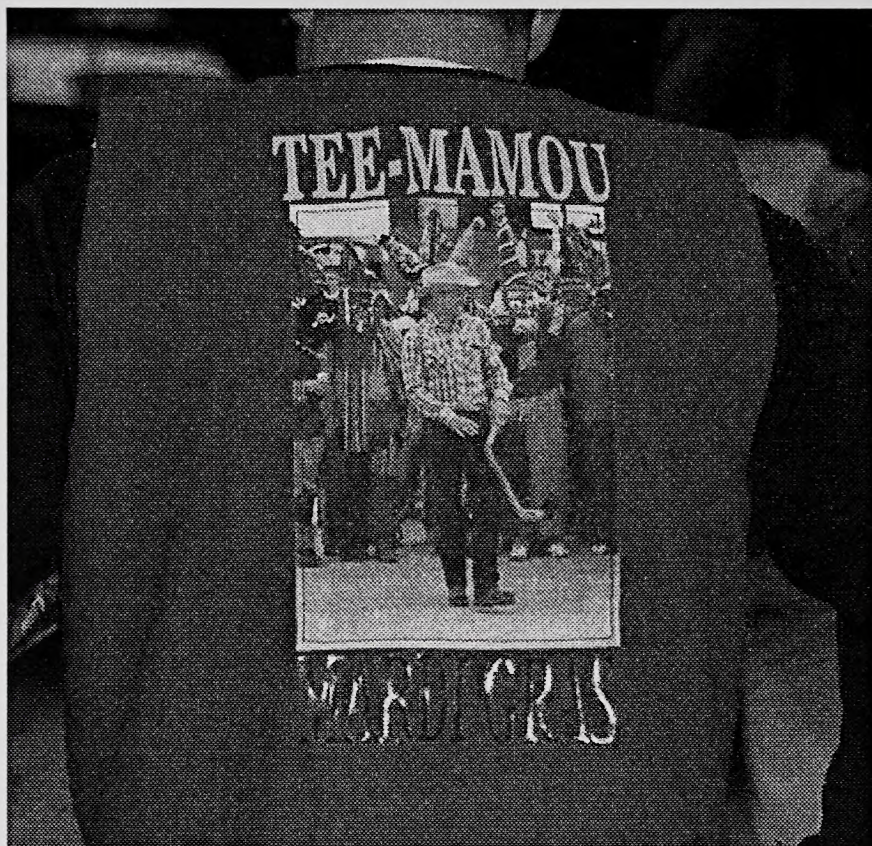


Nègre figure (right)  
is traditional.<sup>4</sup>

Begging for *'tit cinq  
sous* with open-palm  
gesture (below).







Tee-Mamou  
Women's  
Courir.





Another context for the Tee Mamou/Iota Mardi Gras is the Folklife Festival in Iota, a traditional community event married with folklorist-informed heritage features to attract tourism. Crafts and traditional foods, like *maque choux* and dark, sweet cane cake, are sold from booths along the main street. A bandstand/dancing stage is continuously busy, built high above the street level and strong enough to support a day's worth of stomping, twirling Cajun jitterbug dancers. On Mardi Gras afternoon, the Folklife Festival is visited by the Tee Mamou/Iota *courir de Mardi Gras* that parades through town at the end of the day of visiting households in the surrounding countryside.

Each community has a sense of individuation for its own Mardi Gras *courir*, and all the communities have features in common. The interaction of the Mardi Gras (what the corps of costumed revelers is called) and uncostumed members of the community is imperative, a paramount reason for these rural Mardi Gras celebrations. The reintegrative play of the Mardi Gras and their uncostumed community kin and friends (as well as Mardi Gras tourists and small cadres of folklorists) involves begging, mischievous pranks and tricks, and dancing. Folks who come along to enjoy the foolery of the Mardi Gras are begged for money. Families whose homesteads are visited are begged for money and for ingredients to make the communal gumbo served at the end of the day, usually in association with a final Mardi Gras Bal. Some Mardi Gras runs are done on horseback; others, like the Tee Mamou Women's *Courir*, use specially outfitted and painted wagons, pulled by pick-up trucks. Unmasked capitaines, whose role is to "manage" the costumed and often-masked Mardi Gras, lead the processions. Co-capitaines carry and use whips made of braided strips of burlap or braided skeins of yarn to flail warnings at and lay lashes on Mardi Gras.<sup>6</sup>

Led by their capitaine, revelers on foot first approach each house as an arm-linked corps of supplicants, begging in traditional postures of humility, and later break loose into a full-yard ruckus, a comical mischief melee. Mardi Gras *courirs* on horseback ride into the host's yard. A highlight of each household stop is the effort to beg or steal a chicken, a prize of protein for the gumbo pot. Often the chicken is tossed in the air from the porch or the roof of the farmhouse by one of the hosts and then chased to ground by the Mardi Gras. Once the chickens are caught, the dancing done, the pranks played, the last coin begged,



the Mardi Gras troupe is reassembled by the capitaines and moves on. Herding the Mardi Gras back to the wagons is itself a spectacle, a contest between the authority of the capitaines and the infinitely creative Mardi Gras efforts for one more prank, sly escape, or mock-truculent tussling against being dragged away by the feet.

Saturday morning, bright as two tourist pennies, Ernie and I, our pockets loaded with *'tit cinq sous* nickels to give begging Mardi Gras and bearing our 35mm universal tourist talismans, found the Frugé barn—up the same road from D.I.'s—where the Tee Mamou Women's Run was assembling in two wagons for a day of thirteen stops at households around and about the communities of Tee Mamou and Iota. "Tee" is an anglicized spelling of the abbreviated pronunciation of the French word for "little"—*petit*, or *'tit*. Petit (Tee) Mamou (not marked on the detailed DeLorme map we traveled with) is a community distanced some twenty-five miles from the town of (Grand or Big) Mamou (which does appear on the map). Tee Mamou might be called a suburb of Iota (also on the map); and these folks mount *three* Mardi Gras masquerade troupes—the Women's Courir on Saturday before Mardi Gras, the Children's Courir on Sunday afternoon before Mardi Gras, and the Tee Mamou/Iota *courir de Mardi Gras* on the day before the beginning of Lent (men only as masqueraders, women as costumers and mask makers).

Women have held their own courir for more than twenty years and in that time have developed their own sense of performance and mischief protocol. The women's run is captained by Todd Frugé, son of a beloved and recently deceased former capitaine, Gerald Frugé, whose photo in his role as capitaine is reproduced on a special vest worn by his son. Todd Frugé was busy getting the show on the road; but at Carolyn Ware's suggestion, I introduced myself quickly and asked permission to follow and photograph the entourage. Then Carolyn introduced me to Suson Launey, one of the mask makers who is busy all year demonstrating her skills and producing face disguises for others.

Suson Launey is a little over five feet tall with dark hair, large, expressive eyes, and a festive determinedness. "Want one of my oranges?" she immediately asked after our introduction, popping the fruit from a pouch sewn into the front of her costume shirt and offering it up in a gloved hand. She smiled with a hint of mischief and explained that

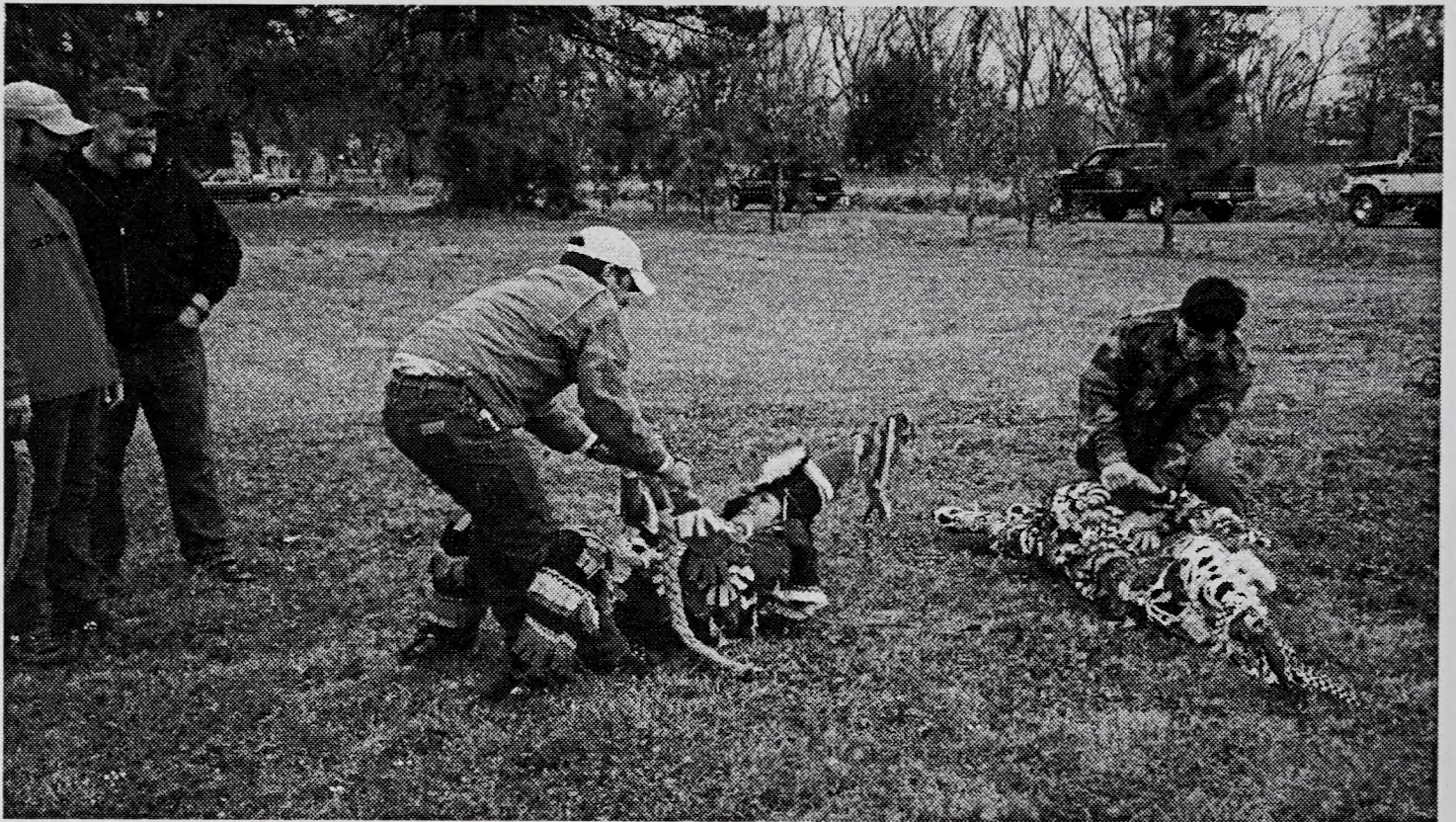




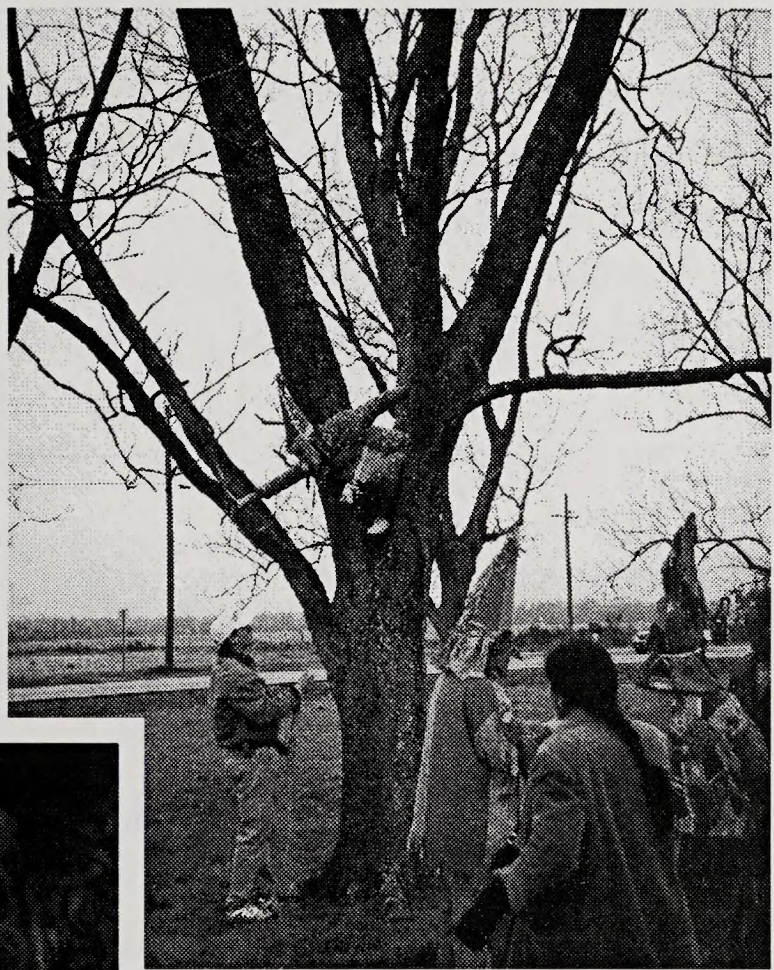
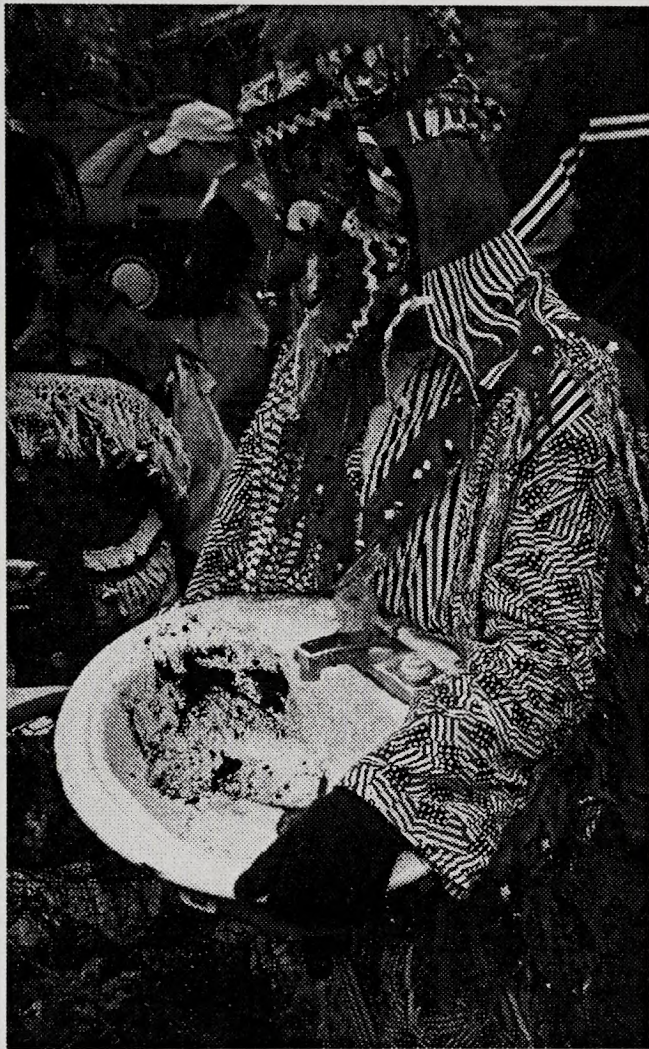
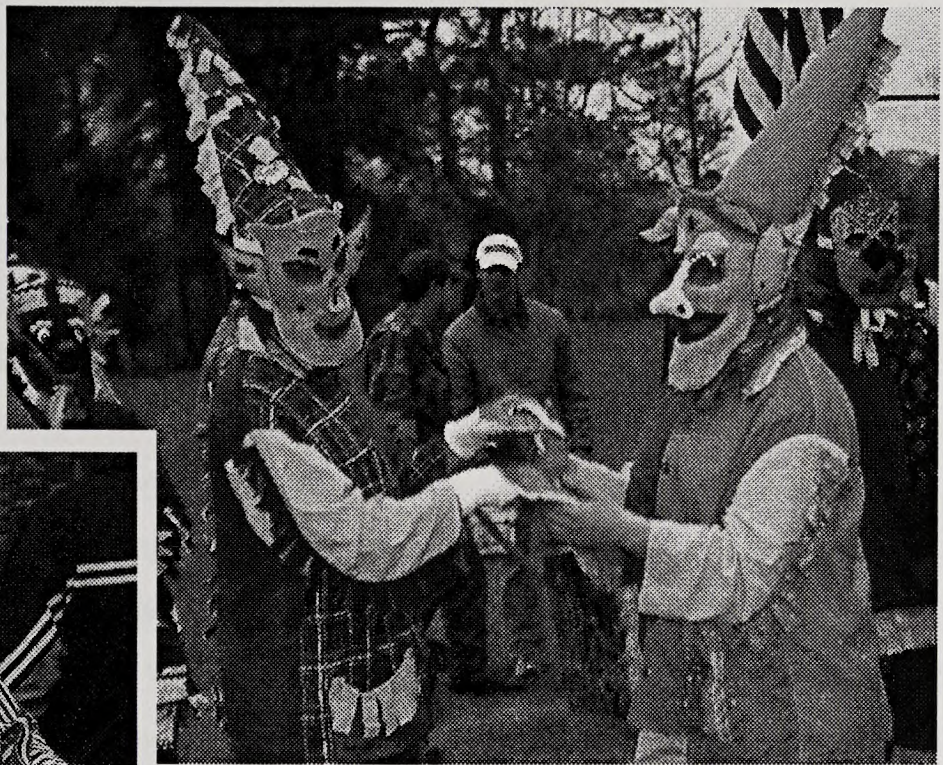
Tee Mamou women  
“steal” chickens.













these “special” oranges were injected with vodka, a treat for the long day in the truck as the troupe wends through the countryside. Suson is a consummate Mardi Gras trickster and one of many around these parts who is passionate about all aspects and meanings of Mardi Gras. Cheerfully insouciant, sly to the moment of creative mischief, Suson became my inadvertent “guide de Mardi Gras” throughout the time Ernie and I followed the Women’s Courir.

Because the Mardi Gras courirs are so full of energy, movement, music and song, and colorful costumes with fascinatingly grotesque and comical masks, the tourist tag-along, an outsider member of what’s called “the tail” doesn’t have to understand much of the meaning of anything that transpires to utterly enjoy the performances. Indeed, the visual impact of rural Cajun Mardi Gras performances is mesmerizing. The community outsider in the “tail,” however, surely will be at least begged by the Mardi Gras, if not also pranked. Be prepared.

74

At one point, a Mardi Gras I thought was probably Suson Launey approached me in the yard of one Women’s Courir stop. She held out the open palm of one hand and tapped the center of the palm with the first two fingers of her other hand, begging with traditional gesture and vocalization.

“*Tit cinq sous...cinq sous*,” the Mardi Gras implored with a nasal, falsetto tone. I pulled nickels from my pocket and dropped them in her hand. “Nickels!” she huffed, derisively. “I don’t want nickels; I want dollars!”

“I’m sorry I don’t have any dollars!” I exclaimed with pitiable regret in my voice.

“Well, then,” the Mardi Gras firmly announced, “I guess I got me a nice, expensive camera!” as she reached with both hands for the camera strap and started to pull the Canon from around my neck.

“No!” I grimaced and held on to the thing with both hands. We tussled for a second or two before she relented and withdrew, still clutching my paltry nickels.

Reporters, filmmakers, and tourist-folklorist photographers are favorite victims of the Mardi Gras who will try to take whatever equipment the unsuspecting outsider might be carrying. The approach is sly. Very often the victim is looking in another direction when the stealthy Mardi Gras approaches and grabs the notebook, camera,



microphone, etc. Not necessarily grabbing to wrest away the object, the Mardi Gras more likely lays a gloved grip on the tourist's item and starts a pulling play, much to bystanders' amusement and the victim's chagrin.

At another point in the same yard, a tall Mardi Gras approached me with the begging gestures and words. I dropped a shower of nickels into her hand, hoping to avoid an outcry against my tourist ignorance and lack of bills. Ernie and I followed the guide book's instructions to have lots of nickels at the ready, "*'tit cinq sous;*" but I was not entirely convinced that nickels would be enough for Twenty-First Century Mardi Gras.

"Listen," the tall Mardi Gras advised, *sotto voce*. "Take it from a professional Mardi Gras; keep some of your money. It's going to be a long day." She returned all but two of the nickels and walked away. Maybe she wanted dollar bills, too; but her way of fooling with the confused tourist was very subtle. A few minutes later, I overheard that same professional Mardi Gras attempting to cajole one of the co-capitaines into giving her an off-schedule beer from the locked case on the wagon. "I've got money," she teased, jingling my two nickels in her hand. I'm almost certain she knew I would overhear her. Maybe not, but I like to think she was gently playing me as the fool a bit more.

Suson Launey was also behind the souvenir whipping I received during the mill-around and pranking portion of another household visit. Ernie had asked if the whips flailed about by the co-capitaines hurt when they struck. "Sure they hurt!" was Suson's answer. "And remember, we pay good money to do this!"—referring to the registration fee each Mardi Gras pays to fund the expenses for the courir. A few moments later—THWACK! I felt a stinging lash across my butt.

"*He's* the one who asked if they hurt!" I yowled, pointing at Ernie. "Not me!"

Tee Mamou Mardi Gras women are clever mischief-makers at every homestead they visit. After he tossed several chickens to the Mardi Gras below, one host was stranded on the roof of his house for the duration of the Mardi Gras' visit because two mischief women had made off with the ladder he had used to climb up. In another yard, one Mardi Gras took the wheel while three more pushed her around in the host's ATV, not garaged or locked up in time for the coming of the Women's Courir.









Tee Mamou/Iota  
Children's Mardi Gras  
masqueraders perform  
the same routines as  
their elders. The  
capitaine's whip is  
made of braided yarn.





Church Point *Courir de Mardi Gras* includes masked and mounted Mardi Gras revelers.





Bicycles, wheel barrows, unmounted automobile tires, emptied oil drums; anything that rolls and is not tied down gets “borrowed” for the Mardi Gras yard melee.

Falling down and rolling away to avoid whip lashes or climbing on and up structures and trees are two traditional ways Mardi Gras call forth the capitaines’ controlling authority. Deciduous trees, especially, bare of leaves in this pre-spring festival, get climbed by one or more Mardi Gras, their costumes’ primary colors contrasting with the bark and limbs, suggesting fertility symbolism as well as the spry fancy of the Mardi Gras.

Each troupe travels with a band of musicians who usually have their own truck and who play for all the entrances and spates of dancing that ensue. Ernie got swept into the crowd of dancing Mardi Gras at the first house we visited. Notice: he got to dance; I got the whip! Cajun dance music is integral to every stage of the Mardi Gras; and it seemed that the musicians, part of the entourage, were exempt from pranks and foolery. I did spot Renée Frugé, another mask maker in the women’s troupe, perched on the band wagon, “playing” the fiddle she had lifted from its resting place during a band break. Renée Frugé’s masks are characteristically animalistic, covered with fur, “furry”-looking loops of yarn, or Spanish moss, among her choices of materials.<sup>7</sup> This day she wore a moss-covered mask over her face and a favorite other furry mask on the back of her head—she was a Mardi Gras coming and going.

Midday, the entourage pulled into the parking lot at D.I.’s for a lunch break. Mardi Gras, capitaines, and uncostumed followers all crowded into the front room, lining up for burgers served impromptu cafeteria style. Masks have to be turned aside in order to munch down a couple of D.I.’s burgers and drink tea. The hubbub was in human tones, not Mardi Gras falsetto hoots; but as I looked around at the other eaters—the array of bobbing, bizarre masks turned aside, no longer hiding their wearers’ faces, some with stuffed “carrot” noses dripping bells from the tip—I had a kind of double vision of this extraordinary community performance, one reinforced by a serendipitous encounter at the door on my way out.

A young woman of the community, Monique, was there with her linebacker-looking boyfriend and had fallen into conversation with Kim Moreau, a man steeped in Mardi Gras family history and Cajun



community meaning. Monique explained that her boyfriend had asked, "What is Mardi Gras?"—a question she found impossible to answer with words. "That! That's Mardi Gras," she shrugged, pushing both open-palmed hands out toward the room where aside-masked Mardi Gras chatted back and forth across tables as they ate and rested. She was so imbued with the tradition, she had no sense of how to explain it to an outsider. Kim Moreau offered another insider's perspective. He spoke about the community redistribution of meager food resources at the end of the winter season, about masquerading for fun and to fool neighbors who know you well, about the importance of identifying and celebrating community at this beginning of the season of deprivation and penance leading up to Easter. Moreau's family members have been running Mardi Gras and making masks for several generations so that the celebration has close kin as well as Cajun community meanings for him. Both insider explanations of rural Cajun Mardi Gras held eloquent meaning for me.

80 | Let me here proclaim, "Mardi Gras is hard work!" Following the Mardi Gras is exhausting; participating must be fatiguing to another order of magnitude. With lunch over and the Women's Courir cranked back up and rolling, Ernie and I decided we were bushed. We obviously were out of shape for the long haul to the end of day gumbo and *bal*. Realizing my diminished endurance capacities was humbling for one who has withstood the freezing cold of many a Mummer's Parade, all day and well into the dark hours, as clowns and jockeys, fancy brigades and string banks pass up Broad Street in performance. Ernie and I "packed it in" at that point and headed back to our Lafayette motel for a lie down. We jumped up again for the evening's doings at the American Legion Hall in Iota where the LeJeune Cove community held its Mardi Gras *bal masqué*, and we followed at least part of the action for three other courirs on Sunday and Mardi Gras Tuesday. The Tee Mamou Women's Courir had given us a beginning bystander's perspective on this passionately artful, personally expressive, community celebration of survival, renewal, kinship, and Cajun identity.

### Mardi Gras "Downeast"

Mardi Gras might take place almost anywhere these days. "Mardi Gras," like "Cajun," has acquired more generalized meanings in widely distributed regions outside Louisiana.<sup>8</sup> As a near harbinger of spring,



end of midwinter, perhaps quasi-religious festival, Mardi Gras also has community-based, regenerative meanings for rural folks in both southwestern Louisiana and southeastern North Carolina.

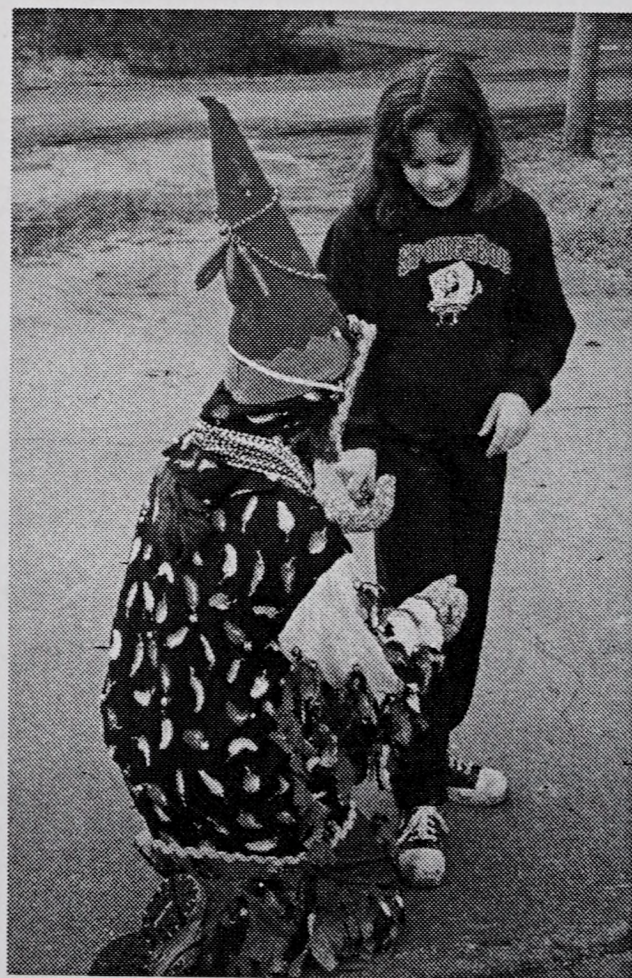
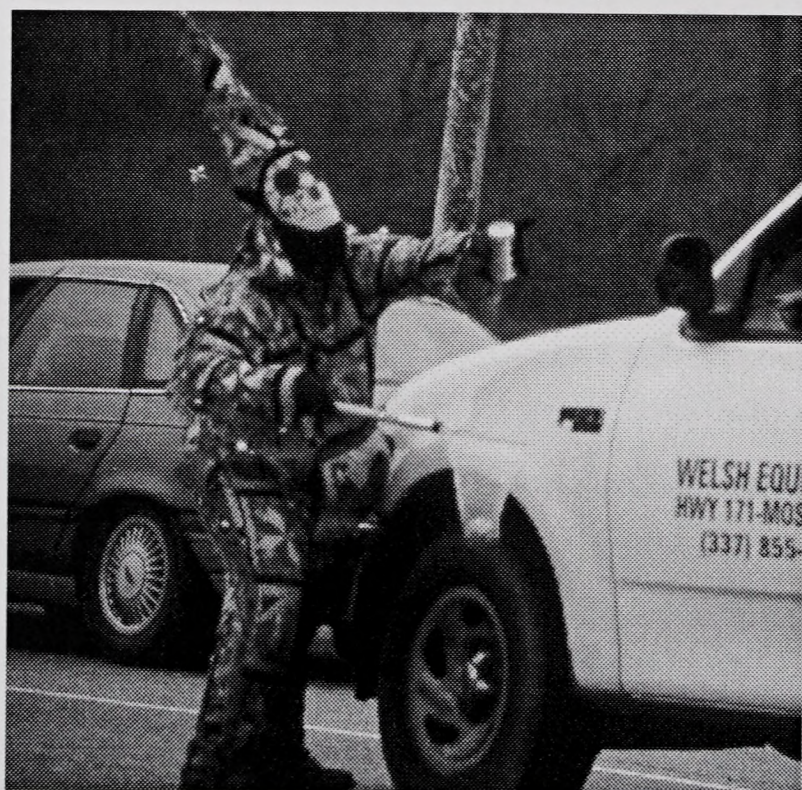
Festival scholar Jack Santino remarks on the extra-Louisiana occurrences of Mardi Gras and predicts a trend toward reformative Carnival traditions.

Although Mardi Gras is...centered in New Orleans and surrounding areas, Louisiana politicians throw a big Mardi Gras Ball in Washington, D.C. More...people are picking up the idea and having Mardi Gras celebrations in different cities and regions in the United States. In some areas of Maine, people of French Canadian background continue a traditional Mardi Gras celebration. In other parts of the United States, various kinds of new Mardi Gras traditions are springing up.... Because of its public nature, and because of the late winter–early spring timing, Mardi Gras might just become a nationally celebrated event before too long. Except in the...[south] Louisiana area, we have lost the coherent Carnival period throughout our country, and this is a real loss. Indeed, I suggest, however, that the holidays of February and March act for us in much the same way the celebratory days of the late Middle Ages and early-modern periods did for our European ancestors. They may yet reform as a new Carnival tradition. (*All Around the Year* 95-96)

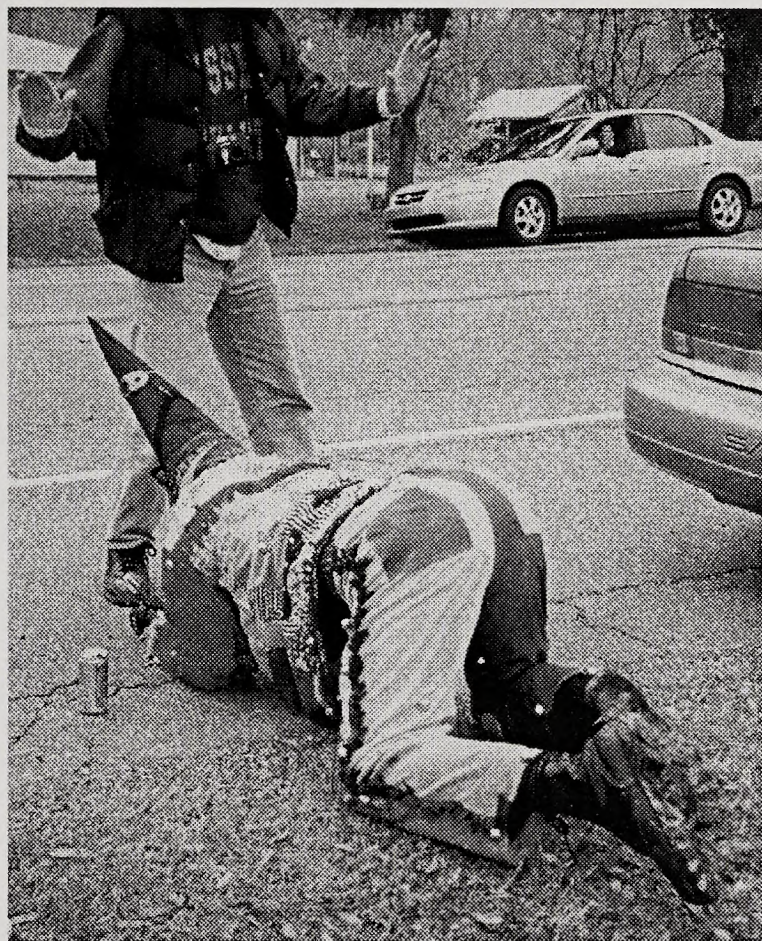
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Indeed, for the past decade, the mainshore village of Gloucester in Carteret County has celebrated a Mardi Gras in and around the Community Club building in a grove of trees “across from the old Gloucester Post Office” (Blake and Garrity-Blake). “Settled about 1800 and named for the city in Massachusetts” (Powell 193), Gloucester is a formerly more active fishing and boatbuilding community whose richly traditional place in Atlantic coastal marine history and culture is typical of many villages in the area known as “downeast.” Gloucester Mardi Gras progenitors Bryan Blake and Barbara Garrity-Blake are village residents. Among many other activities and accomplishments, Bryan is a master boatbuilder and house carpenter, and Barbara is an anthropologist specializing in fisheries; they are parents and performing musicians, core members of the Cajun Zydeco band, Unknown Tongues.<sup>9</sup>









Basile Mardi Gras beg motorists for money and perform inside a Basile nursing care facility (below) whose residents include former Mardi Gras revelers.





Mardi Gras “downeast” is, of course, an event with its own character, corps of revelers, and meaningful center. An “open” event, Gloucester’s Mardi Gras is well publicized with home-designed, hand-colored posters; by word of mouth; and on the Gloucester Mardi Gras web pages where one can see photos from previous celebrations and hear Tongues’ music clips. There too is described the performance process and model for Mardi Gras “downeast.”

February 15, 2003 - Unknown Tongues will host the Eleventh Annual Gloucester, NC Mardi Gras at the Community Club. Preparations start the Friday night before (sure, come help!) with veggie chopping and a music jam. Mardi Gras starts at 11:00 Saturday morning with a Fool’s Procession and live music. Gumbo, deep fried turkey, crawfish, and delicious side dishes will be ready by early afternoon. The Unknown Tongues play around 3:00, kicking the dance off with the children’s King and Queen coronation, march, and bead toss. Extra special collectors’ beads are awarded to everybody who sticks around and helps clean up around 5:00! Call “Keeper of the Sacred Recipe” Margie...to donate gumbo ingredients, or bring a side dish Saturday. This event will always be FREE and OPEN. Kids and instruments? Oui! Dogs? Non! (Blake and Garrity-Blake)

At the core of Gloucester’s Mardi Gras is the Cajun and Celtic music, played by the Tongues and other local musicians, and the gathering of community from Gloucester and surrounds. A sense of community is shared among young families, elder neighbors and kin, and a regional network of friends involved in music, coastal cultural and scientific research, fishing, and boatbuilding.

Rather than a celebration in which licentious inversions take place in masquerade and mockery, the Gloucester Mardi Gras gathers natives and “movers in,” elders and youngsters into a noisy room, fragrant with food aromas, and crowded to the walls with folks who move into and out of a musical, dancing center. Children make and wear masks, constructed from materials provided at the Mardi Gras. Only a few adults will masquerade and only for a brief period of the day. Alcohol is consumed by some during the event, but inebriated antics are neither expected nor tolerated. The passing of a king cake, the tossing



of beads by the children to the sideline of adults, and the boy and girl crowned “king” and “queen” are among the markers for the Louisiana Mardi Gras borrowings.

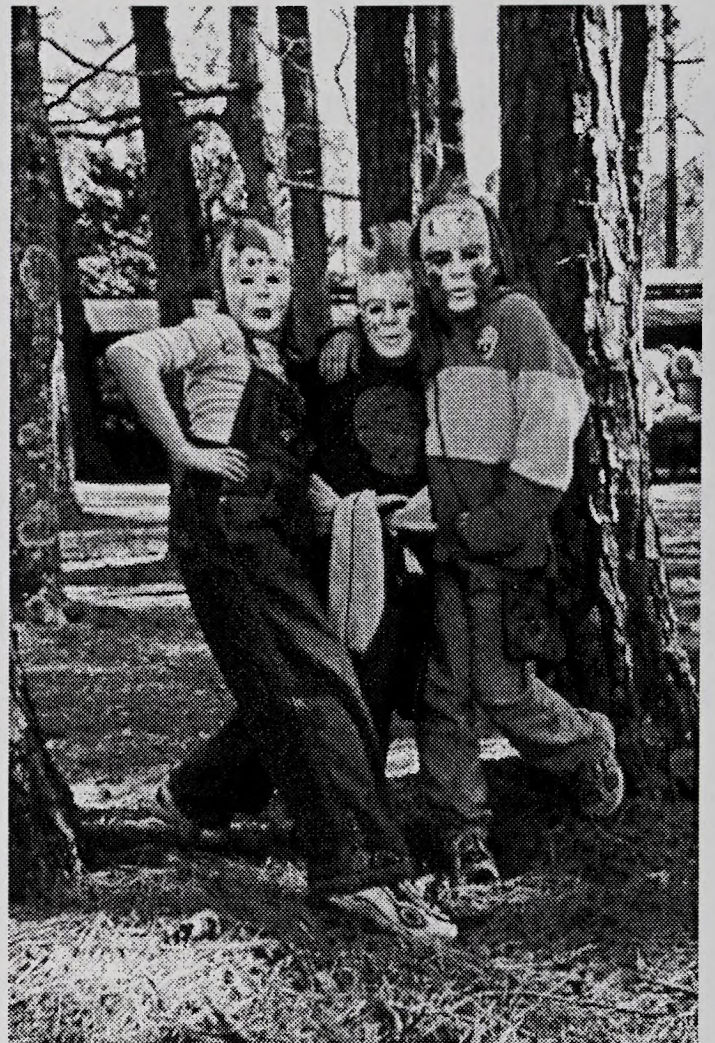
There is no real surprise in a Mardi Gras approximate event even in rural eastern North Carolina. But Gloucester’s Mardi Gras may be the only example of a celebration far-flung from Louisiana that consciously identifies with the rural Cajun Mardi Gras as a model rather than with the New Orleans city-style celebration, characterized by parades of floats and uncountable numbers of beads and other “throws” tossed to onlookers, some of whom bare parts of their bodies normally clothed to attract the attention of bead-tossers.

We model our Mardi Gras after the community spirit of the RURAL Mardi Gras of Southwest Louisiana, *without the horses, whips, and stealing of chickens* [emphasis mine]. (Blake and Garrity-Blake)

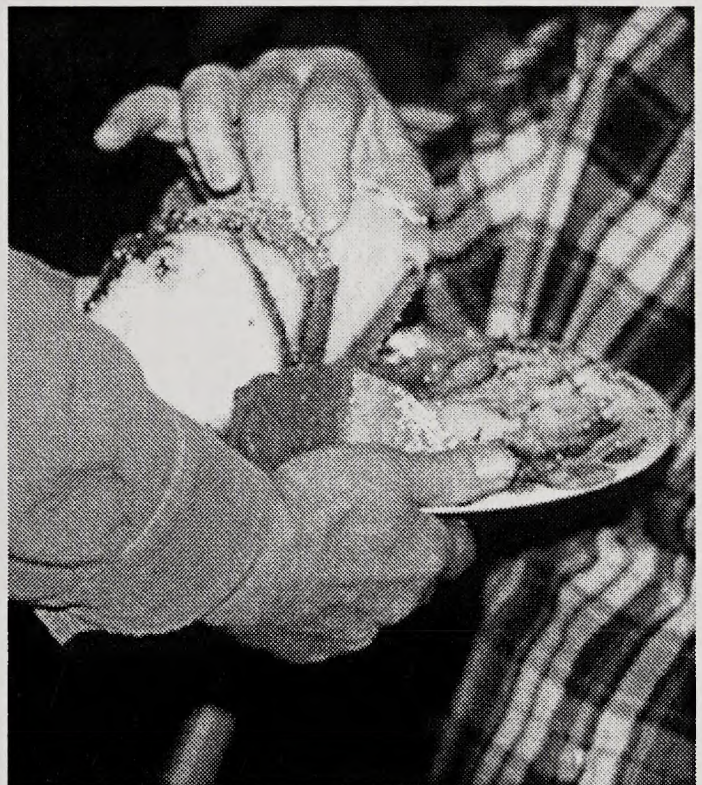
No horses, whips, or stealing of chickens?! Gloucester’s Mardi Gras expresses the spirit of a different community than those settled for generations by French-speaking Cajun farmers and ranchers in Louisiana.<sup>10</sup> Here, as in other mainshore North Carolina settlements, historic generations of fishing-based family life and economy are changing in many ways. Villagers now include “movers-in” as well as “natives,” creating an interesting contemporary community status, the locals “from off.” In addition to villagers from Gloucester and surrounding settlements at Marshallberg, Smyrna and Straits, Mardi Gras also is intended to draw from a much wider region of Cajun music lovers, shag dancers (in addition to Cajun two-steppers and jitterbuggers), and folks interested in an afternoon of shared food, (both communally prepared and pot luck provided) dancing, and Cajun-Zydeco music. This festive event has over the decade of its existence created its own community from within the coastal region and from traditional music fans across the state.

Because at Gloucester there are no horses (no dogs, even!), whips, no Mardi Gras begging for gumbo ingredients or “stealing” the yard furniture, much less chickens, the community “spirit” of the rural Louisiana Mardi Gras has to be understood in the culturally dynamic context of “downeast” Carolina.











## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Macon Fry and Julie Posner describe the topography of the prairie region in their fine book, *Cajun Country Guide*.

If you travel on Interstate 10 between Lafayette and the Texas border or spend any time in the Cajun Heartland of Evangeline and St. Landry parishes, you will find a flat and nearly treeless terrain that fails to comply with any of the swamp stereotypes of Cajun Country. A few feet beneath the level prairie surface lies a nearly impervious layer of clay that holds water on the surface and deters the growth of trees and other large plants. At one time this region was covered with towering grasses and wild flowers. Now most of the prairie has given way to the plow. Farmers have taken advantage of poor drainage and flooded fields to grow rice and crawfish. (37-38)

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<sup>2</sup> "Mardi Gras" is used in several ways here, reflecting my understanding of the usage of the phrase among folks I overheard and talked with in Louisiana. "The Mardi Gras" can refer to the social group of revelers, the troupe as a unitary corpus. Indeed, this usage is rendered literal when the participants link arms to strengthen resistance to the physical authority of the capitaines, or when the Mardi Gras approaches a house singing the begging song. "The Mardi Gras" can also refer to an individual reveler.

<sup>3</sup> We had advice and help from several folklorists who live and work in the region. Frank DeCaro and Rosan Jordan recommended resources and gave advice about what we might encounter as we joined "the tail" of unmasked family and friends, tourists, journalists and folklorists who follow any Mardi Gras run, as it winds through the byways around the communities that have organized troupes. Carolyn Ware, who has written about the Tee Mamou Women's Run, was very helpful with suggestions and information via e-mail exchanges. It was Carolyn's suggestion that we arrive in time to visit D.I.'s for that first encounter with a Mardi Gras performance. Along the way on Mardi Gras Tuesday, we met up with Barry Ancelet and Carl Lindahl, who were following the *Basile courir de Mardi Gras*, and Carolyn Ware and Maida Owens, who were chaperoning a van load of teachers in the "tail" of the *Basile courir*.



<sup>4</sup> Blackface and/or transvestite guising rôles are traditional masquerade strategies for playing the “other” in various ethno-regional traditions outside southwestern Louisiana Cajun Mardi Gras as well. But blackface guising is perceived much differently now than it would have been in earlier generations of the tradition. Blackface mummers disappeared from Broad Street in Philadelphia during my adolescent years (1960s) as a fan of that city’s Mummers Parade on New Year’s Day. See Carl Lindahl’s discussion of Cajun Mardi Gras blackface figures, the nègre and négresse, in his article, “A Note on Blackface.”

<sup>5</sup> I include a segment on Louisiana Cajuns in my English 3570 American Folklore class in which I show several Pat Mire films, including *Dance for a Chicken: The Cajun Mardi Gras*. This film communicates very well the meaning and method of rural Louisiana Mardi Gras celebrations, but my first-hand experience was even more thrilling.

<sup>6</sup> Many of the most active scholars of Cajun and Creole Louisiana are represented in a Special Issue of the *Journal of American Folklore*, edited by Carl Lindahl. This piece especially benefitted from the articles by Lindahl, Barry Jean Ancelet, Patricia Sawin, and Carolyn Ware.

<sup>7</sup> My experience with mask makers is additionally informed by the work of Carl Lindahl and Carolyn Ware. Their book, *Cajun Mardi Gras Masks*, details Mardi Gras traditions in Basile and Tee Mamou, and is richly illustrated with fine photographs.

<sup>8</sup> A web-surfed selection of disparate Mardi Gras events and “branded” products includes: the Ontario, Canada bicycle “regatta” and Mardi Gras in September; the (mid-February/(Valentine’s Day) Mardi Gras Date Auction in Boston, Massachusetts, to benefit the Liver Research Foundation; the south-central Wisconsin Alzheimer’s Association Mardi Gras fundraiser, at the Masonic Center in Madison; the Mardi Gras Fiesta Tropicale in Hollywood, Florida; the Lake Wales, Florida, Mardi Gras (in its nineteenth year in 2003); the San Luis Obispo Mardi Gras (in its twenty-fifth year); Mardi Gras celebrations in Seattle, Washington, and Memphis, Tennessee; the Fairport Harbor Mardi Gras during the July 4th holidays, including Finnish singers and ending with fireworks; the Sydney, Australia Gay & Lesbian Mardi Gras; the Best Western



Mardi Gras Inn in Las Vegas, Nevada; ultimatewedding.com's Mardi Gras-themed receptions; etc.

<sup>9</sup> Unknown Tongues history entwined with downeast environment and culture appears on the band's web site:  
<<http://www.unknown tongues.com/utpage2.htm>>.

<sup>10</sup> For those who might not be aware of the rural Louisiana ways of Mardi Gras, the Tongues site has a helpful link to the Louisiana State University at Eunice gateway to web sites for various Acadiana community Mardi Gras events. Acadiana is the term for the area of southwestern Louisiana in whose parishes live the largest population of persons of Cajun French language and cultural heritage. From the main page, <<http://www.lsue.edu/acadgate/mardmain.htm>>, the web-surfing cultural tourist can access photos and descriptions of Mardi Gras courirs in Basile, Church Point, Elton, Eunice, LeJeune Cove, Mamou, Tee Mamou / Iota, and Soileau, all prairie Louisiana communities, north and west of the city of Lafayette, as well as the Tee Mamou Women's Run and Children's Courir.



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# 150 Years of North Carolina Quilts

Selections From the  
Pattie Royster James  
Quilt Collection

Quilts on display, above, are from the Pattie Royster James Quilt Collection, housed at St. James Place, the restored Primitive Baptist Church in Robersonville, Martin County, where A. Everette James and Pattie Royster James established a museum for their folk art collections.

*Left: Catalogue from exhibit at the Gallery of Art & Design, North Carolina State University, 2001.*

*All photos courtesy of A. Everette James, Jr.*



## African American Quilts: Patterns and Codes

~ A. Everette James, Jr.

Do the patterns of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century African American quilts, both utilitarian and improvisational, result from only aesthetic decisions or do they reflect the legacy of an important historical phenomenon, the movement of slaves to freedom? Do the quilts reflect the African textile influence directly or has the creolization of African culture in America so Europeanized self-expression that the antecedent inspiration is obscured?

Additionally, what is the relation of the patterns of traditional African ceremonial cloths to the symbols used by early twentieth century African American quilters? Do the quilts of the early twentieth century continue to reflect the character and symbolism of those used to guide fugitive slaves as they traveled along the Underground Railroad in the mid-nineteenth century from slavery to anticipated freedom in the mid-nineteenth century? These questions, while intriguing, are not directly answerable but add to the importance and value of examples of North Carolina African American quilting.

Depending upon the reference source, there are ten to twelve quilt patterns that were employed by participants to inform the fugitive slaves and to instruct them as to the next correct action along their path. According to oral legend, a quilt chosen to signal the action was hung so that the message might be seen by anyone but understood only by those who knew the textile encoding. If a Monkey Wrench pattern quilt were draped over a fence, it allegedly meant that the slaves should begin to gather the provisions for their journey. If circumstances continued to be favorable for the initiation of their journey, the second quilt placed on display would usually be the Carpenter's Wheel instructing them to proceed with their plans.



Since the wagon was a common conveyance and was sometimes used in transporting of runaway slaves, this symbol has been traditionally thought to mean to gather up the necessities of the journey and they should be accommodated by the space within a wagon. The pattern used to signal the propitious moment for escape itself was alleged to be the Tumbling Box or Tumbling Blocks. The quilts with this imagery are dramatic in appearance and often create the illusion of three dimensionality. Some scholars favor the descriptor for this pattern as "boxes" rather than blocks, feeling that this conveys packing to facilitate moving on as the famous Charleston quilter, Ozella McDaniel Williams, believed. The modern Tumbling Block quilts can be appreciated simply for their aesthetic appeal, but some knowledge of their possible role in encoding the instruction of fugitive slaves adds even greater significance to the imagery they produce.

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The next in the sequence of quilt representations for the code would have been the Bear's Paw. Some folklore scholars believe this pattern represents the admonition to actually follow the tracks of the bear. A general interpretation seems more likely as bears are adept in choosing the most expeditious trail through the woods and the fugitive slaves should attempt to do likewise.

A favorite route of the Underground Railroad was through the Appalachian chain of mountains, and the bears often made a similar migration. This symbolism was probably more generic as it addressed the prudent behavior of choosing an appropriate route that was as direct as possible and would also avoid detection. Among the Bear Paw symbols was a variation termed the Hand of Friendship pattern, speaking to the need for assistance if the journey were successful. In taking these unrevealed paths, the fugitive slaves might well reach a fork or a juncture in their improvised journey representing a crossroads and need direction to choose the proper alternative.

Here they might choose to go into hiding, symbolized by the Log Cabin pattern. The fleeing slave might wish to remain there until the most advantageous route for a safe passage became clear. There are many variations to the log cabin message and any contemporary quilt with a composition of short linear strips forming a square will be designated as representing this pattern.



A crossroads to some interpreters of this iconography was not a fork or diverging juncture but instead a destination. The Cleveland, Ohio, area especially the town of Dresden, Ohio, was one of the most documented crossroads and a major terminal in the Underground Railroad that led to the large area around Ontario, Canada. The crossroads patterns are little understood by quilt collectors, whether they are seen in nineteenth- or early twentieth-century quilts. However, the Log Cabin pattern and its nuances are quite universally recognized. As noted above, any pattern constructed by small linear pieced strips are included in this description because of its popularity. Most twentieth-century linear quilts by African Americans are not variations of the Log Cabin pattern but are true strip quilts fashioned from various materials such as discarded neckties. This is an interesting and somewhat unappreciated genre unto itself as regards the strip quilt.

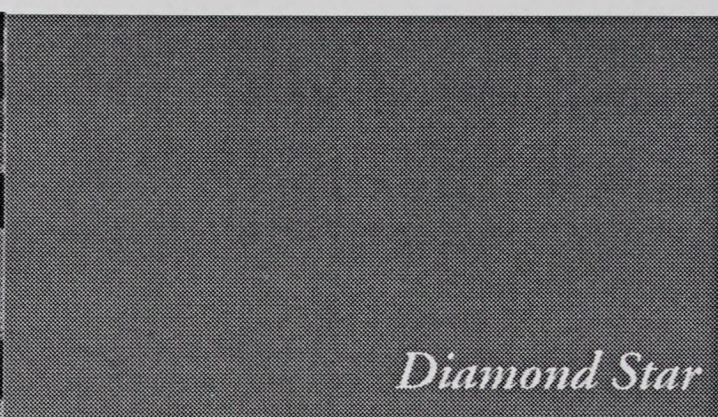
The subsequent sequence of commands from the remaining symbols has inherent variability and is manifested by an array of quilt patterns. Most commonly, the Shoofly design instructs the fleeing slaves to dress more formally. Alternatively, the message may have been that the fleeing slaves should make their way in unpredictable pathways to escape detection. Dobard believes that this pattern instructed the slaves to travel in a staggering, evasive fashion to elude the slave hunters. Some scholars include a later pattern, the Drunkard's Path, as a subsequent derivation. The Drunkard's Path was also adopted by the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) as their signature quilt and they have been credited by some as recasting its name and meaning.

The Star or Evening Star quilt has an almost self-evident interpretation. To travel under the cover of darkness would insure maximum security for the movement of the fleeing slaves. This would represent the general instruction of "follow the stars to freedom." Certainly a nineteenth and early twentieth century quilt collection of African American quilts can demonstrate the traditional imagery of the patterns employed in the Underground Railroad Code but the patterns such as the star quilts may be a response to contemporaneous imagery and the popularity of these patterns today on a purely aesthetic basis.

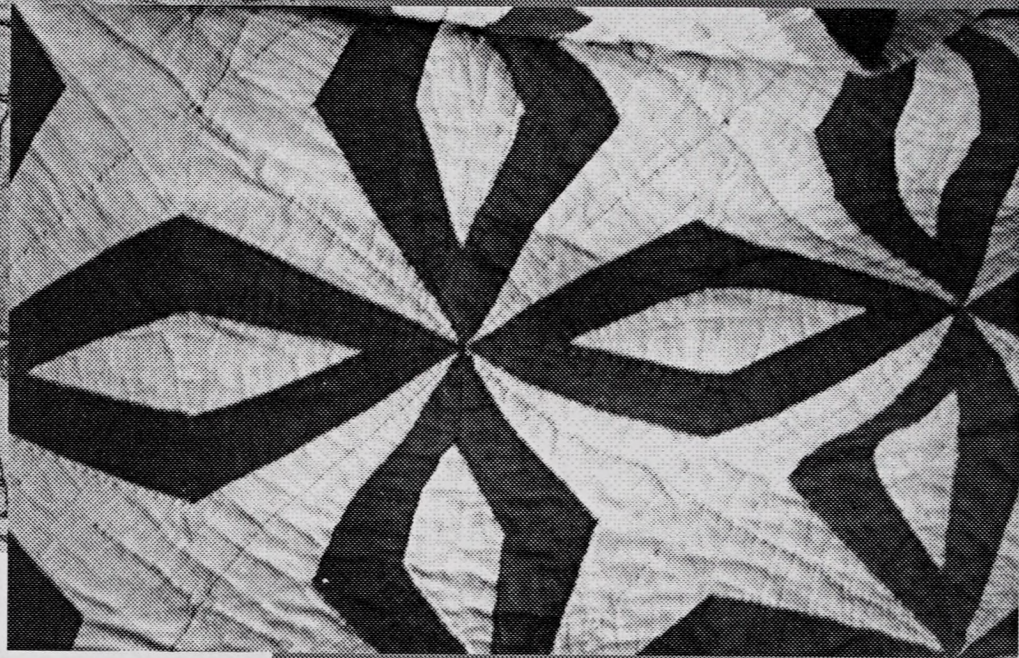




*Ceremonial Raffia  
Cloth, West African  
Block Print*



*Diamond Star*



*Monkey Wrench*



*Layered Star*





The cotton and satin bow tie pattern has several interpretations but was probably used to instruct the slaves to discard their torn and stained garments and, some believe, to go to church and pray in thanks for their delivery from the bonds of slavery. Some embellishments of this imagery also suggest that the freed slaves exchange Double Wedding Rings while most scholars believe the Double Wedding Ring quilt pattern is a later invention having nothing to do with this phenomenon.

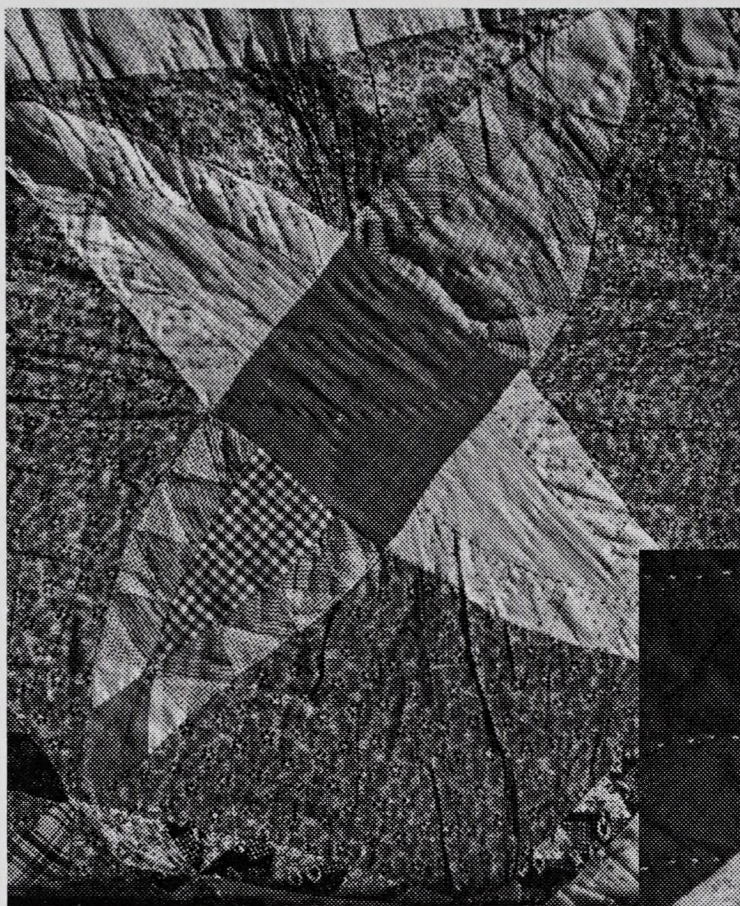
The Bow Tie configuration can indeed have several striking variations and provides one of the most visually compelling of the Underground Railroad quilt patterns. Some scholars have proposed that the Bow Tie pattern symbolized the arrival of the fugitives to a more permanent location such as Dresden, Ohio, or Dresden, Canada, where disguise would not be necessary.

Other quilt patterns often associated with the symbolism of the Underground Railroad are not so much instructional as they are descriptive. Flying Geese are represented by a series of triangles arranged in a pattern as to connote flight and possibly indicate direction. The most common configuration or pattern is that the triangles are all pointing in the same direction, but in others more than one direction is indicated and rarely the arrangement indicates north, south, east and west. The obvious symbolism was that the Flying Geese represented the fleeing slaves.

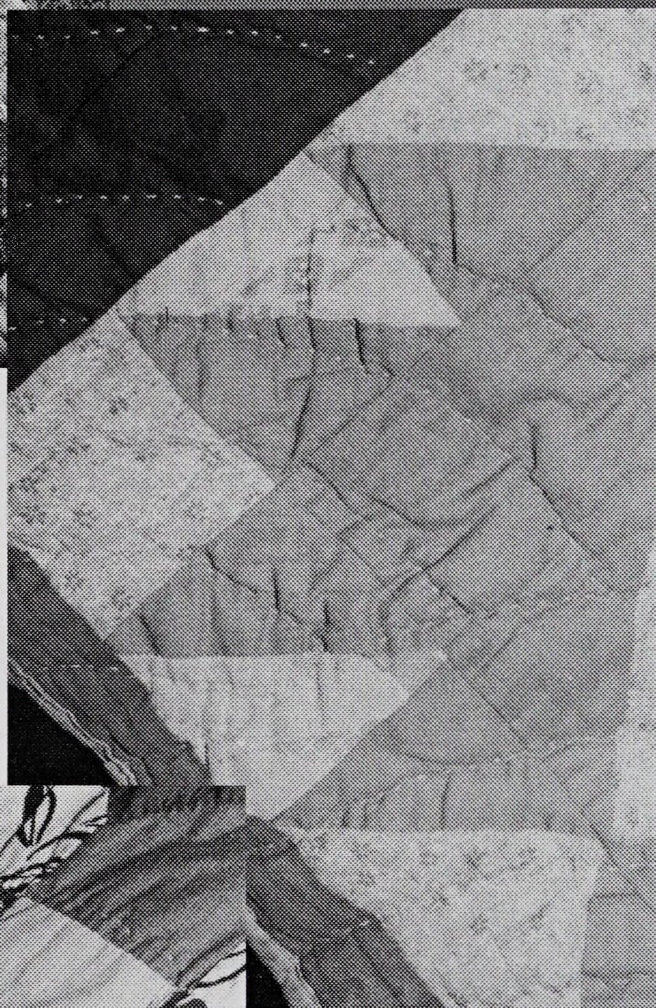
Many of the African American quilts are tied or tufted rather than quilted, reflecting the time available for this activity. The zigzag pattern of the Drunkard's Path has multiple interpretations but one may have been derived from the ancient traditional African belief that evil traveled in straight lines. Certain African symbols from ceremonial cloths have a similar pattern.

Whether the utilitarian object of the African American quilt played an important role in the intelligence of this clandestine movement is not universally accepted. The specifics of documentation will obviously benefit from further research and analysis. Since few examples of African American quilts with these patterns remain, collectors and quilt scholars have depended greatly upon oral testimony by descendants of the quilters who, by now, represent several subsequent generations. However, from the viewpoint of the collector or scholar, the African American





*Four Point Star*



*Bow Tie*



*Bear Claw*



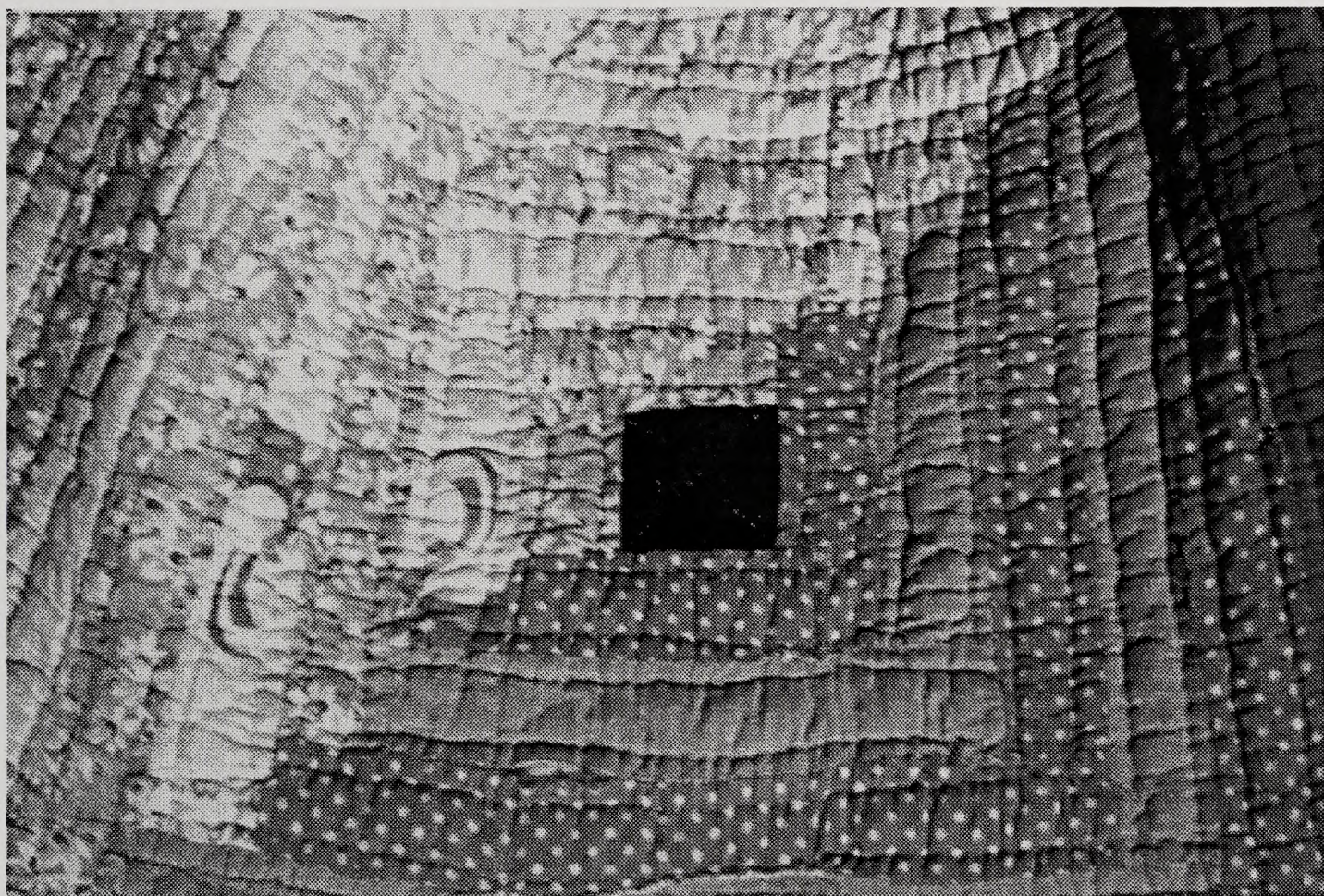
quilt will receive greater future notice and appreciation because of its historic importance.

The Quilt Code, while neither encyclopedic nor proven with scientific exactitude, nevertheless provides us with access to a number of insights regarding the slave's escape from the plantation. The quilt provides us with visual representation of how ingenious and determined these people were in crafting their escape. It also may provide a link between African and what later becomes African American symbolism such as represented by the secret meanings in the duplication of ceremonial material such as the Raffia Cloth.

The importance of quilting in African American communities remains today. One can marvel at the legacy of improvisation and creativity in the face of severe resource limitations. Magnificent quilts were fashioned from discarded materials. Despite limited time for this labor-intensive activity, elegant and interesting patterns were achieved.

While there exists no characteristic African American quilt appearance, and this designation can only be substantiated by provenance, these colorful and unique patterns appear as significant antecedents for the images created among African American quilters today.

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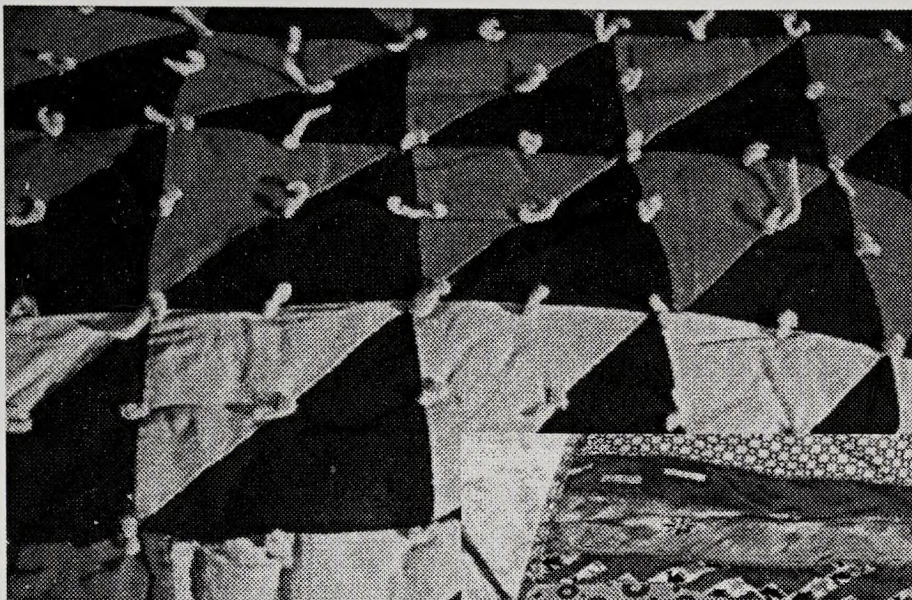
*Log Cabin*



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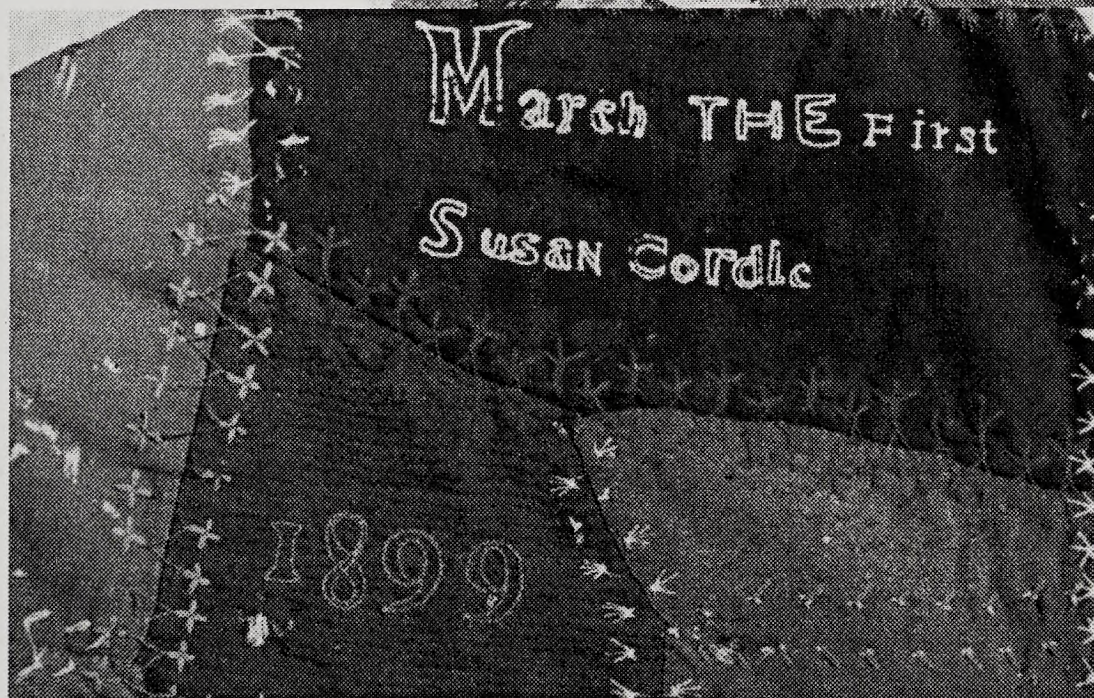
*Tied or Tufted Quilt*



*Silk Tie Quilt*



*Crazy Quilt by  
S. Cordle*





## The Farmer-James Collection of African-American Quilts: An Exhibit Review

~ Joyce Joines Newman

**T**he *Farmer-James Collection of African-American Quilts* is a traveling exhibit organized by Everett Adelman for North Carolina Wesleyan College's Four Sisters Gallery. The exhibit opened on January 20, 2003, in conjunction with Rocky Mount's 14th Annual Martin Luther King, Jr., Prayer Breakfast and continued through March 14, 2003. The exhibit will travel to the North Carolina Central University Art Museum in Durham in Fall 2003, and to Hampton University Museum of Art in Hampton, Virginia, in January 2004.

The thirty-seven quilts are from the collection of Dr. A. Everette James, Jr., and his wife, Dr. Nancy Jane Farmer, who for more than ten years have assembled a group of sixty quilts made by African American quiltmakers from the thirty-four North Carolina counties of Alamance, Beaufort, Bertie, Bladen, Brunswick, Camden, Chatham, Columbus, Craven, Cumberland, Durham, Gates, Granville, Greene, Halifax, Hoke, Hyde, Jones, Lee, Martin, Moore, Northampton, Randolph, Scotland, Pender, Person, Pitt, Richmond, Robeson, Tyrrell, Vance, Wake, Washington, and Wayne. Several quilts of unknown provenance are also included. The oldest quilt in the collection is from the Civil War era, but most were made in the early to mid-twentieth century.

Michele Cruz designed the small catalogue funded for publication by the North Carolina Humanities Council and the Mary Duke Biddle Foundation. The catalogue begins with acknowledgments by Adelman, Professor of Art at North Carolina Wesleyan College, who is Director and Curator of the Four Sisters Gallery, followed by an essay on "African-American Quilts—Collectors' Thoughts" by Drs. Farmer and James. In her essay, "Selected Styles and Themes—An Historian and Quilter's Perspective," Anita Holloway, an exhibiting quiltmaker and African American Art Historian and Curator of African Art at the Virginia Museum of Fine Art in Richmond, addresses African aesthetics and



traditions among the enslaved people who were brought to the United States. What quilts signify as material culture is the subject of the final essay, "Memory Work: Quilts and Southern African-American History," by Dr. Elsa Barkley Brown, an African American Professor of American History at the University of Maryland at College Park, who specializes in African American Reconstruction and New South history. A nice and useful touch to this catalogue is the inclusion of color thumbnails of all the sixty quilts in the Farmer-James collection with their accompanying information.

This is perhaps the most extensive exhibit of African American quilts ever held in North Carolina, and is well worth seeing for that reason alone. There are minor errors of identification and attribution for a few of the quilts. Many have been assigned dates in the 1920s and 1930s, although their fabrics indicate that some were probably made at least ten to twenty years later. One quilt is said to contain an Alamance plaid, the famous North Carolina fabric from the late nineteenth century, but the plaid fabric of the displayed quilt is not the same texture as a true Alamance plaid. A Shoofly Variant quilt consisting of fabrics in olive green and an orange similar to antimony orange is said to be made of vegetable-dyed fabrics; these fabrics may have been home-dyed using chemical dyes but do not appear to have been colored with vegetable dyes.

The exhibit is interesting because it serves as a striking example of the difference between folkloristic and artistic treatments of quilting traditions. Farmer and James began their quilt collection with random acquisitions for St. James Place, their folk art museum in Robersonville in Martin County. Their goal for the Pattie Royster James quilt collection housed there was to include a quilt from each of the one hundred North Carolina counties. The Farmer-James collection has a more focused purpose, influenced the 1999 book, *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad* by Raymond G. Dobard and Jacqueline L. Tobin (New York: Anchor). Dr Dobard, Professor of Art History at Howard University, was the keynote speaker at a quilt symposium in Greensboro several years ago, which James attended. In his keynote address, Dobard described research on the use of quilt patterns to encode information to assist fugitive slaves escaping north via the Underground Railroad.



The story of the Underground Railroad Quilt Code began in 1994 when Jacqueline Tobin, a teacher, collector and writer of women's stories from Denver, Colorado, met an elderly African American quilt vendor named Ozella McDaniel Williams in the Marketplace of Charleston, South Carolina. Williams eventually shared with Tobin the quilt code she had learned from her mother, who in turn had learned it from her mother:

There are *five square knots* on the quilt every *two inches* apart. They escaped on the *fifth knot* on the *tenth pattern* and went to Ontario, Canada. The monkey wrench turns the wagon wheel toward Canada on a bear's paw trail to the crossroads. Once they got to the crossroads they dug a log cabin on the ground. Shoofly told them to dress up in cotton and satin bow ties and go to the cathedral church, get married and exchange double wedding rings. Flying geese stay on the drunkard's path and follow the stars. (22-23)

104 Williams also revealed a secondary code that indicated what fleeing slaves needed to do to survive on their journey:

Ladies tied their heads up in sunbonnets and bandannas and went out gardening in nine different patches by the moonlight. Men put on coveralls and went fishing on sailboats and came back and ate fish on the Dresden plates. Anyone died on the way they would weave baskets and leave at the cemetery. And they would take muscadine [grape] vines and they would pick wild flowers and make wreaths and also leave at the cemetery. (170)

Dobard and Tobin are frank about the fact that their interpretation of the quilt code is not documented fact: "Exactly how the code was used, we do not know" (69). However, after extensive research they have presented their theory of what the two codes mean. They propose that quilt patterns provided encoded instructions on the preparation for escape, the route to take, and how to survive the journey (70-71). Along with encoded meanings in spirituals and topographical stitching, quilts provided a map of the journey to be made that guided travelers who might never before have left their home plantations, but had made



the courageous and risky life-or-death decision to attempt escape (64, 71-81, 129-152). Quilts were an obvious choice for secret communications between slaves because they already had a metaphoric function—quilt pattern names carried encoded political, social or emotional messages in the Anglo as well as African American tradition (28-31). There was also an affinity between many geometric quilt patterns and traditional African ritual designs, making them familiar and acceptable vehicles for encoded meaning (44-54).

According to Ozella Williams, one quilt at a time was hung on a fence to signal the slaves to take a specific action while it was on view. Ten patterns were used: Monkey Wrench, Wagon Wheel, Log Cabin, Shoofly, Bow Ties, Cathedral Church, Double Wedding Rings, Flying Geese, Drunkard's Path, and Tumbling Boxes. Williams explained that when the Monkey Wrench quilt was displayed, slaves were to gather all the tools they might need on the journey to freedom. The second quilt in the sequence was the Wagon Wheel pattern, which indicated that the slaves should pack all the things that would go in a wagon or that would be used in transit. When the quilt with the Tumbling Boxes pattern appeared, it was time to leave (70-71). Three other quilt patterns had significance for the fugitives. The Bear's Paw indicated a trail through the Appalachian mountains, Crossroads stood for the city of Cleveland, Ohio, and the (North) Star indicated the direction to freedom (83-127).

In addition, Dobard and Tobin believe that the grid created by the yarn used for tying or tacking quilt tops was used as a scale for the distance between safe houses on the Railroad, in increments of five to twenty-five miles. The location of safe houses was like a net, and zigzag movement between them was frequently used to evade pursuers (71-81, 92-93). Fabric, color, pattern, and stitching or tying could all be used as part of a secret visual code that was used openly in everyday objects, their meaning *hidden in plain view* from whites (31, 35, 50-51)—"Knots are merely knots to the uninitiated" (77).

The relationship of African and African American textiles and the retention of African aesthetic traditions and value systems by enslaved Africans have been of interest to quilt scholars since the early 1970s. Researchers have defined *African* textile aesthetics and related textiles to other art forms such as blues, jazz and African American religious music.



These include bold, visually dramatic arrangements of pattern and color, particularly high contrast colors such as dark blue and white, and the use of complex visual rhythms—repetitions of accented elements throughout the overall design interrupted unpredictably by contrasts of patterned and unpatterned elements or contrasts of staggered patterned blocks and others that are carefully aligned. These textiles show a preference for asymmetry, spontaneity and improvisation rather than predictability (Vlach 44-75; Thompson 195-223).

There are indications that the relationship of some African American quilt designs to African textile traditions was more direct. Though unexplained, the similarity of patterns in Dahomean royal appliquéd textiles and those in ex-slave Harriet Powers' Bible Quilt of 1886 and Pictorial Quilt of 1895-98 from Athens, Georgia, is a striking testimony to the presence of strong African cultural influences. (Vlach 44-54). Embroidered elements on quilts may also represent direct retentions of African ritual symbols; I suspect this is true of the embroidered crazy quilt made by Matilda Loftin between 1913 and 1918 in Davie County, North Carolina (see Roberson 175).

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Overall, the theories of Dobard and Tobin concerning the Underground Railroad Quilt Code remain on the level of conjecture. Their discussion shares a weakness of much writing on the relationship between African and African American aesthetics: there are too many generalizations about *African* aesthetics, *African* religions, and *African* textiles that ignore the diversity of cultural traditions in Africa and too much reliance on asserting a connection between the existence of a tradition in a specific African setting and one that seems similar in North America, without showing any direct connection between the two. This is not to say that their theories are not correct—only that they have yet to support them with concrete evidence that provides the level of conviction found in Robert Farris Thompson's discussion of the direct retention of Mande-influenced round house forms in Mexico or the continuation of rhythmized textiles from the tradition of the Mali empire of West Africa in the multistrip capes of 20th-century Suriname (195-223).

The purpose of the Farmer-James exhibition is unclear. Although many of the quilts consist of patterns named in the Quilt Code, there is no direct relationship. No evidence is presented to indicate whether the African American quiltmaker who made a Monkey Wrench quilt in the



1920s was aware of the use of the pattern to help escaping slaves before the Civil War. The same block pattern was immensely popular with white quiltmakers during the twentieth century. More research and fieldwork might determine the significance of these patterns for post-slavery African American quiltmakers.

It is striking that so many of the quilts in this exhibit are block quilts—composed of repeating geometric pieced blocks separated by single narrow bands of fabric called “strips,” sometimes with a single corner block. Few have borders or more complex multiple stripping or patterned corner blocks. The resulting overall design is contained within a more or less rigid horizontal and vertical grid. In a 1977 field study of regional variations in quilt patterns in North Carolina, anthropology graduate student Mary Ann Emmons and I found that this kind of quilt design was more characteristic of the German-derived communities of west-central North Carolina than of tidewater Eastern North Carolina, home of the largest concentration of enslaved populations in the state. Our results are described in the *North Carolina Country Quilts* exhibit catalogue. Block quilts, with their basically rigid horizontal/vertical organization, also contrast to characteristics such as asymmetry, improvisation, and unexpected interruptions of patterns that are considered to be among the most African traits of many other African American quilts. The emphasis on block quilts in this exhibit probably results from the fact that the collectors intentionally selected quilts that have patterns mentioned in the Underground Railroad Quilt Code. In seeking to illustrate the existence of these patterns in African American quilts, the collectors have selected quilts that conform more to Anglo American than to African aesthetic traditions.

Another kind of selection that seems to have operated in the Farmer-James collection concerns fabric choice. The majority of these quilts are composed of predominately striped, checked or plaid fabrics rather than the floral fabrics that are abundant in quilts from the 1920s and 1930s, and there seems to be a preference for a color combination of red, white and blue. Many of the striped fabrics are manipulated so that the stripes reinforce the geometric pattern, or form a dynamic counterpoint to other elements in the block. One may wonder if the collectors’ quilt selection was influenced by Thompson’s discussion of the persisting influence on the aesthetic preferences of African Americans of striped



bands from the African men's narrow loom: "The weight of the tradition has resulted in a related predilection among West Africans for imported striped cloth. Narrow stripes were preferred as equivalent to narrow strips. On this simple substitution, stripe for strip, was to turn a major aspect of the African-ness of certain forms of Afro-American dress" (209). Once again, it seems possible that the collectors have chosen quilts that illustrate a scholar's comments; the consequent danger is that the collectors are imposing criteria for selection that result in a set of quilts that illustrate scholarly theories more than the aesthetics of African American quiltmakers.

There also seems to be an economic or class bias in the Farmer-James Collection. As Elsa Barkley Brown notes in her catalogue essay:

[O]ne of the most striking features of the Farmer-James quilts is their backing. Generally, when one sees quilts made by working-class southern black Americans in the late 19th and 20th centuries, a significant number are backed with flour, feed, and fertilizer sacks or other pieced scraps. Not one of the quilts that I saw had a sack-backing. A number were pieced but usually with the same quality fabric as the top, and many of these quilts are backed with full lengths of wool suiting or other cloth of quality and lengths that could well have been made into a piece of clothing. (25)

The use of more expensive fabrics for quilt backings indicates an economic level that would have been unusual for many African American quiltmakers in the early twentieth century. While it is not surprising that some quiltmakers were able to afford such fabrics, it is unlikely that the economic prosperity indicated by these quilts is representative of many African American quiltmakers.

The most disturbing aspect of this quilt collection and exhibit, however, is what is not included. The quilts in this exhibit are presented as objects divorced from their makers and social contexts. It is regrettable that whoever purchased these quilts and identified them as African American did not note information about the person, family or estate from which the quilts were purchased. Some are not even identified by the county of origin. One is led to wonder how the collectors know they are African American if they do not even know where they came from.



Because the quilts are from such widely scattered counties, the collection offers no insight into personal, family or regional preferences in patterns or designs. Extracted from the social and community context in which they had meaning, they do not further the viewer's understanding of the relationship of visual symbols and their use in human lives. What was the meaning of these quilts in the lives of those who made and used them or in the communities where they were formed? Are there variations in patterns or techniques in different parts of the state that might be related to African cultural origins of enslaved persons? What do we know about how these quilts fit into people's lives? Where did African American quiltmakers obtain fabrics and supplies for quilting? Did they have the same access to a variety of fabrics and materials as white quiltmakers?

Another thing missing in the presentation of this collection is any awareness of the scholarly context of quilt research in the state. North Carolina was the site of the first field research project ever conducted on quilting funded by National Endowment for the Humanities, and it had the largest and best-funded state quilt documentation project in the United States, establishing a model for quilt documentation projects throughout the country. In the 1980s, workers with the North Carolina Quilt Project, funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, photographed over 10,000 quilts statewide, including African American quilts. Students in the Folklore Curriculum at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill have conducted research in quilting traditions among Anglo, Native American, Southeast Asian and African American communities. In spite of this rich and extensive resource of information on quilts in North Carolina, the Farmer-James collection has not been considered within the state's quilting tradition.

Especially startling for an exhibit in Rocky Mount, which has a large and proactive African American community, is the fact that there is no involvement of that community. At the time when the exhibited quilts were made, Rocky Mount was a large and prosperous town with a range of economic situations for African Americans. One early twentieth-century, embroidered crazy quilt in the collection bears inscriptions that indicate it was made by students in a college or other educational institution. There are African American women living in Rocky Mount who attended college during the early twentieth century,



and interviews with them could have added an important dimension to our understanding of African American quiltmakers of the period. Yet the exhibition is accompanied by no interviews of living quiltmakers or mirroring of the collection by quilts owned by African American families in Rocky Mount who know the makers, history, and significance of their own quilts. Drawing on the knowledge of this community could have added a vital dimension to the exhibit. It is hoped that the next exhibition of African American quilts at North Carolina Wesleyan College will focus on quilts from the immediate area and their living cultural context and meaning in the lives of quiltmakers and quilt users. While one can only conjecture about the meaning of the Underground Railroad Quilt Code, such an exhibition might provide a more profound understanding of the meaning of quilts to those who make and use them.

110 | Despite its orientation, the exhibit is a treat to anyone who likes quilts. Two of my favorite quilts in the exhibit are the Shoofly variant quilt in orange and green mentioned above, whose place of origin and maker are unknown, and another quilt that reflects strong African American design principles, identified as a "Crazy Quilt with Log Cabin Patch and Uniform Cloth" from Craven County c. 1925. The Shoofly quilt is pieced in a straightforward block pattern in two unusual colors. It would be immensely boring as a visual design except for the inclusion of two blocks where the green fabric is replaced by a green of darker value. In their difference that interrupts the relentless repetition, these two blocks are a brilliant choice by the quiltmaker, creating strong visual interest and depth. Though not what one would call a true Crazy Quilt, the Craven County quilt is composed of sections of plain, unpatterned areas where the primary visual interest is the texture of the seams in woolen clothing scraps from a gray uniform and a brown fabric that appears to be from a gored coat, bordered by bands of eccentric piecing that sometimes resolves into a sort of geometric pattern. The pieced area on the right contains smaller and more varied pieces than that on the left. This quilt attests to the ingenuity of a quiltmaker with limited economic means and to the continuation of African American design principles of syncopation, interruption of the expected pattern, and improvisation.



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Left to right: Mike Craver, Jim Watson, Bill Hicks, and  
Tommy Thompson. Red Clay Ramblers, c. 1974.



*Photo by Chuck Lewis, 1974. Courtesy of Jesse Thompson Eustice.*

*“The Red Clay Ramblers were  
never just a local band; their  
reputation and fan base spread far  
and wide as they toured throughout  
the US, Canada, Europe, the  
Middle East, and Africa.”*

*~ Jack Bernhardt*